

Lev Shestov – a ghost in the 20th century intellectual landscape

Early Reception

This is a story about a disappearance and a rediscovery. We might start with Shestov's early commentators.

In 1905, the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyayev commented on the deeply unjust neglect of Shestov's work. This could be explained only "by the fact that Shestov's themes ... seem completely unnecessary for the broad highway of history: Shestov's thought is an underground stream, noticed by and needed by only a few."¹ After Shestov's death in 1938, Berdyayev added that Shestov's subject "was concerned with the destiny of personhood,² single, unrepeatable, unique. ... Shestov's theme is religious in nature; it is the theme of the unlimited possibilities of God.... The figure of Lev Shestov (Berdiaev tells us) is most essential to the multiform Russian Renaissance of the beginning of the (20th) century."³ MOST ESSENTIAL

In his 1927 *History of Russian Literature*, D.S. Mirsky – one of the most brilliant literary critics of his generation – stated that Shestov's "style is the best and finest and aptest polemical style ever used in Russia. Of the many readers of Shestov, only a minority are in tune with his central idea; the majority like in him the great ironist, the master of sarcasm and argument." And what is this central idea? "We must seek for that which is above pity, above good. We must seek for God."⁴ HIS STYLE IS THE BEST AND FINEST

Mirsky continues: "The inner kernel of (Shestov's) philosophy is profoundly religious and pious. (But) it has – and can have – no practical bearing Truth, to Shestov, is a mathematical point of no dimensions, which can have no action in the external world. The external world is as it is and remains unaffected by it."⁵ THE EXTERNAL WORLD IS UNAFFECTED BY SHESTOV'S PHILOSOPHY

In the foreword to the English translation of *Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (1920), D.H. Lawrence, perhaps the leading novelist of his time, described Shestov's style as "puzzling

¹ Nikolai Berdiaev, *Tragedia i Obydennost'*, 1905, in *Typi religiozni mysli v Rossii, Collected Works*, v.3, Paris, YMCA Press, 1989 (with thanks to Marina Ogden for providing a copy of this article).

²In older translations, the Russian *lichnost'* tended to be translated as *personality* – which is now almost exclusively reserved for psychology and for media stars. I translate *lichnost'* as personhood.

³ Nicolas Berdyayev, *The Russian Mind*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1962, p.235.

⁴D.S. Mirsky, *History of Russian Literature*, Chapter "The New Movements of the Nineties," London, Routledge, 1927, accessed in PDF online. In his preface to Sergei Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, (2020) Professor John Milbank notes that "we surpass negative irony, ... when we positively embrace flashes of linguistic 'wit' that are fragments of revelatory and participatory disclosure." This points to the positive aspect of the irony noted by Mirsky.

⁵ *ibid*

at first. Having found (that) the ‘ands’ and ‘buts’ and ‘because’s’ and ‘therefores’ hampered him, he clips them all off deliberately ... so that his thought is like a man with no buttons on his clothes, ludicrously walking along all undone.”⁶

In his monumental *History of Russian Philosophy* (1953), V.V. Zenkovsky wrote: “Shestov is essentially a religious thinker; he is not anthropocentric but theocentric, perhaps more so than any other Russian philosopher.” Zenkovsky comments that Shestov “combines an elegance of power of expression with a rigour and purity of verbal form A careful reading of Shestov makes clear the breadth of his themes.”⁷ THEOCENTRIC, PERHAPS MORE SO THAN ANY OTHER RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHER

All of which brings us to the question why Shestov’s work is so little known and discussed. The neglect is of long standing. A meeting between Shestov, Edmund Husserl and Heidegger in Germany in 1928 may have helped shape Heidegger’s landmark lecture “Einführung in der Metaphysik,” given in Freiburg in 1929. But no credit was given by Heidegger. Husserl was more generous. He responded to Shestov’s sharp criticism of his work in an article of the previous year with a strong appreciation of Shestov’s work, and they maintained a friendly correspondence until Husserl’s death in 1938.⁸

Emmanuel Levinas reviewed Shestov’s work on Kierkegaard when it was first published in 1937, but developed his future thought without reference to Shestov. Albert Camus cites Shestov on Kierkegaard in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but Shestov’s thought does not come into focus. Camus uses Shestov as a foil on whom to test out his concept of the absurd. Shestov is found wanting: “the subtlety of his thought is a sad juggling act.”⁹

Shestov himself does not advance his cause. In conversation with his disciple Benjamin Fondane, he proclaimed his failure rather than his success. He describes people hammering at the wall of reason, imagining they have found an opening, while in fact the wall remains intact and impenetrable. In the conversation of 16 November 1937 he says:

⁶Cited from Matthew Beaumont, *Lev Shestov*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, p.70.

⁷ V.V. Zenkovsky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2, New York, Columbia UP, 1953, p. 781, in the definitive English translation by the philosopher George Kline.

⁸ Ramona Fotiade, Introduction, p.12-13, in *Lev Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem*, 2nd Edition, Athens, Ohio, Ohio UP, 2016. Shestov's article on Husserl, 'Qu'est-ce que la vérité' [What is Truth], had been published in the January-February 1927 issue of the *Revue philosophique*. The same article was published in German translation in the *Philosophischer Anzeiger* (nr. 1, 1927). <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/mlc/resschol/levshestovstudiessociety/biography>

⁹ Albert Camus, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.1, Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 2006, pp. 241-253 (citation from p.343) and note 15, p. 1287; notes 4,5,7,15 pp. 1288-1289. Camus may have rediscovered Shestov via Rachel Bepalov’s *Cheminements et Carrefours* (Paris, Vrin, 1938). He received this on publication from his friend and mentor, Jean Grenier, and commented: “J’ai retrouvé des thèmes que je me proposais d’aborder dans mon ‘Absurde’ (i.e *Le Mythe de Sisyphé*). Albert Camus/ Jean Grenier *Correspondence 1932-1960*, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, letter 23 and note 1, p.243.

“the more the years pass, the harder it becomes for me to believe that it will be possible to overthrow the wall (of reason),” and on 26 February, 1938 he says to Fondane: “the (rational) thought that you are battling with is my (rational) thought too. One must not believe that one has overcome it – it is still inside us.”¹⁰ This aspect of Shestov’s thought – the impossibility of escaping the wall of reason – is captured by Yves Bonnefoy in his preface to the French edition of *Athens and Jerusalem*.¹¹

Shestov in the 2nd half of the 20th century

Ramona Fotiade, at the University of Glasgow, has traced the influence of Shestov on French thinkers in the second half of the 20th Century – Bataille, Camus, Deleuze; and in the literary world – Yves Bonnefoy, David Gascoyne, Joseph Brodsky, Mario Vargas Llosa.¹² But their contributions are hard to find. For example, we do not find Shestov mentioned in the translated essays of Brodsky or Vargas Llosa.¹³

One should note the work of Bernard Martin in the 1960s, translating almost the whole of Shestov’s work into English. Bernard Martin also gives us a succinct introduction to Shestov’s work. David Patterson, who spoke on Shestov at IOCS last Autumn, also published a chapter on Lev Shestov’s ‘Second Dimension of Thought’.¹⁴

In a fleeting mention, French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément named the three greatest Russian religious philosophers of the first part of the 20th century: Nicolas Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov and Lev Shestov – without further elaboration.¹⁵

More recently, the philosopher William Desmond alluded to the “fundamental insights of Shestov” in *Being and the Between*, and in *Is there a Sabbath for Thought?* he shadow

¹⁰ Benjamin Fondane, *Entretiens avec Léon Chestov*, in “*Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*,” *textes établis et annotés par Nathalie Baranoff et Michel Carassou*, Paris, Plasma, 1992 accessed at www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/fon/f_1.html

¹¹ Yves Bonnefoy, ‘L’Obstination de Chestov’, Preface to Léon Chestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem*, Paris, Flammarion, 1967; Aubier, 1993. I owe this reference to Ramona Fotiade’s online transcript.

¹² Ramona Fotiade, Introduction, “Lev Shestov – The Thought from Outside,” in Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, 2nd Edition, Athens, Ohio, Ohio UP, 2016, pp. 1-20; Ramona Fotiade, “Chestov-Deleuze: L’image-temps et la pensée du dehors,” (18-19), 2022, pp. 117-125.

¹³ Yves Bonnefoy, ‘L’Obstination de Chestov’, Preface to Léon Chestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem*, Paris, Flammarion, 1967; Aubier, 1993; Joseph Brodsky, *Less than One – Selected Essays*, London, Penguin Books, 1986; Mario Vargas Llosa, *Touchstones – Essays on literature, art, and politics*, New York, Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2007; *Making Waves, Essays*, New York, Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1997.

¹⁴ Bernard Martin, Preface, in *A Shestov Anthology*, Athens, Ohio, Ohio UP, 1970, pp.ix-xvi; Bernard Martin, Introduction, “The Life and Thought of Lev Shestov,” in Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, 2nd Edition, Athens, Ohio, Ohio UP, 2016, pp. 25-26. I was not able to obtain David Patterson’s *Faith and Philosophy*, University Press of America, 1982, with a chapter on Shestov’s Second Dimension of Thought (with thanks to Marina Ogden for this reference).

¹⁵ Olivier Clément, Introduction *Deux Passeurs: Vladimir Lossy and Paul Evdokimov*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1985, p.10.

boxes with Shestov as an undefined adversary, with whom we are assumed already to be familiar.¹⁶

Shestov's Thought

Shestov described his own thinking as “an art which aims at breaking the logical continuity of argument and bringing man out on the shoreless sea of imagination, the fantastic tides where everything is equally possible and impossible.”¹⁷ Marina Ogden describes Shestov's thought as follows: “Shestov believes that thinking originates in a moment of vulnerability: the moment in which the boundaries between the human/divine and the self/other have melted.”¹⁸ V.V. Zenkovsky concluded his evaluation of Shestov's thought thus: “Shestov asserted the supra-rational nature of being and of God with unsurpassed force.... The demolition of theoretical and ethical rationalism clears the philosophic terrain for the construction of a system which ‘takes as its point of departure the fact that God is.’”¹⁹ Olivier Clément pointed to the role of the angel of death, a line of thought pursued by Marina Ogden: “Shestov, this Jewish thinker on the borders of Christianity, smashes the so-called evidence produced by a closed rationalism, and celebrates the visitations of Death that become visitations of faith.”²⁰

***Athens and Jerusalem* hammers at Reason**

Shestov viewed *Athens and Jerusalem* as the summation of his thought. But he hammers at the towers of philosophical certainty with such a relentless stream of negation, that it is not easy to grasp the positive aspects of his work. Yves Bonnefoy's preface captures this negativity. So we can first of all classify *Athens and Jerusalem* as a work of apophatic philosophy. Shestov's earlier publications proceed more cataphatically, piling up assertions and aphorisms.

Athens and Jerusalem is also a carefully constructed *suite* of connected essays, each of which was first published separately. Within each essay, each paragraph stands almost alone as an *etude*, with a central point that hammers at reason. Throughout, certain *motifs* return again and again – *Socrates did not die; Spinoza only imagined he had attained reason; men can move mountains; science is based on irrational belief*. These repeated motifs are intrusive and mocking, like the night-time howl of the hyena in Africa.

¹⁶ William Desmond, *Being and the Between*, Albany NY, SUNY Press, 1995, p.26; *Is there a Sabbath for Thought? Between Religion and Philosophy*, New York, Fordham UP, 2005, Chapter 5, pp. 167-199.

¹⁷ Cited from Matthew Beaumont, *Lev Shestov*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, p.28.

¹⁸ Marina Ogden, “Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev Shestov on Dostoevsky: the unfinalized dialogue,” *Studies in Eastern European Thought*, 2023 (online publication) (with thanks to Marina Ogden for providing a copy of this article).

¹⁹ Zenkovsky, Vol.2, pp. 790-791.

²⁰ Olivier Clément, Introduction *Deux Passeurs: Vladimir Lossy and Paul Evdokimov*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1985, p.10.

For example: “Spinoza does not cease repeating to us that *Necessity is the essence and foundation of being* For him, *sub specie eternitas*²¹ has the same meaning as *sub specie necessitas*²². ”²³ Or, in a long discussion of Kierkegaard, “it is useless to speak of sufferings: no matter how terrifying they may be, *can they shake the order and connection of things?* Spinoza’s ‘*not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse but to understand*’²⁴ is as unpitying as the laws of hell.”²⁵

A Musical Analogy

One might compare the early symphonies of Shestov’s contemporary, Gustav Mahler, in which a whole folk song (Frère Jacques), in Symphony 1, or a sleigh-bell-like motif in Symphony 4, intrude into the classical symphonic development. One can hear these as mocking the soon-to-collapse symphonic order. Or again, the intrusive hurdy-gurdy passage in the final movement of Bela Bartok’s Fifth String Quartet prefigures the complete collapse of classical tonality.

This musical analogy was already noted by Emmanuel Levinas in his 1937 review article: “The philosophical project of M. Shestov often takes on the allure of a brilliant literary essay. It is a ‘poem’ rather than a ‘work’ The unity of the book (on Kierkegaard) is more symphonic than logical.”²⁶ In early 20th century classical music, tonality begins to break into atonality: rigorous thematic development breaks into episodes of pure sound. Likewise, in Shestov’s work, rational thought is slowly made permeable to the irrational and to the alogical. We are not yet at an overt philosophy of deconstruction. We are still within the realm of linear rational thought, with the phrases of his predecessors used as battering rams at the heart of each tightly constructed paragraph.

Coming to the present day

The challenge that we face in approaching Shestov’s thought is that we have few introductory texts, and almost no secondary literature. And this for a writer born in 1866 who died in 1938. How often today do we find ourselves relying, in the first instance, on a 70 year old introduction, such as that of Zenkovsky, or a 100-year old overview, such as that of D.S. Mirsky?

Ramona Fotiade’s chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Philosophy* (2020) brings Shestov out of the shadows and places him where he rightly belongs in the

²¹ ‘in the perspective of eternity’

²² ‘in the perspective of necessity’

²³ Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p.150.

²⁴ “*non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere*”

²⁵ Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p.181.

²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, review of Léon Chestov, *Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle*, *Revue des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 101, No.1-2, 1937, pp.139-141.

pantheon of 20th century philosophy. Dr. Fotiade thus joins V.V. Zenkovsky, and Shestov's translator Bernard Martin, as an authoritative commentator on Shestov.²⁷ We should also note the work of Marina Ogden, one of the most prominent Shestov researchers working today.

To sum up, we may read Shestov as testing the bounds of everyday language and refusing the metaphysical. All attempts to breach the wall are an illusion. Or we can read him as a precursor to the philosophers of deconstruction, dis-aggregating every smoothly constructed rational statement and insisting on the adimensionality of truth. Or we can read Shestov as an invitation to awakening and to the second dimension of thought.²⁸

²⁷ Ramona Fotiade, "Lev Shestov: The Meaning of Life and the critique of Scientific Knowledge," *Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Philosophy*, Oxford UP, 2020, pp.464-479. Bernard Martin, Preface, in *A Shestov Anthology*, Athens, Ohio, Ohio UP, 1970; Bernard Martin, Introduction, *Lev Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem*, 2nd Edition, Athens, Ohio, Ohio UP, 2016.

²⁸ Marina Ogden, "From groundlessness – to freedom: The theme of 'awakening' in the thought of Lev Shestov," *Studies in Eastern European Thought*, (2023) 75:125-141 (*online publication*) (with thanks to Marina Ogden for providing a copy of this article).