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Lev Šestov: 'Duality' in Life and Thought at the Time of the Rift of the Socio-Cultural Paradigm

The Russian Jewish thinker Lev Šestov (1866-1938) is often regarded as a precursor of European existentialism. His 'philosophy of tragedy' is also attributed to Irrationalism. Albert Camus (1965) characterised Šestov as a "new man of the Absurd" in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. With the collapse of the Soviet system, Šestov's writings found their way to the reading public and continue to attract strong interest. This undying appeal of his thought demonstrates, in particular, its visionary, supra-temporal character.

Notably, with all the tragic nature of Šestov's philosophy, focussed on life-death borderline situations, typical for the Silver Age more generally, there seems to be a different borderline in both Šestov's life and work. As we will show, it revealed itself in him being torn between irreconcilable spheres: his aspiration to the humanities and the need to get involved in his father's textile business (the sublime and the earthly); his Jewish roots and his allegiance to Russian literature; his involvement in literary criticism and his striving towards philosophy. Even his thought can be considered as operating at two different levels – what Viktor Erofeev (1975) labelled the "night-time" (tragic/subversive) and "day-time" (mundane/normal) vision of the philosopher.

In the socio-political context, after the revolution, Šestov had to deal with the Bolsheviks, who tried to turn him into an advocate of their policies. Uncompromised, Šestov left Soviet Russia and wrote a prophetic anti-Soviet piece *What is Russian Bolshevism?* (1920)[1]. However, he failed to anticipate fascism encroaching upon Europe in the early 1930s.

In this paper, we shall analyse this duality of Šestov's life and heritage, looking at it in the context of the socio-political and cultural rift of 1917. In particular, we want to see how his perception of the era of revolutionary changes is predicated on these features of his personality and philosophy, and to understand if there is a correlation here (i.e. whether, and how, the shift of the socio-cultural paradigm impacted on these peculiarities of Šestov's life and thought).

[1] The actual title of this work, used less frequently, is *Čto takoe bol'ševizm* (*What is Bolshevism*). See fn. 25 and fn. 33 below.

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1. *Biography and Philosophy: Irrationalist Thought Versus Rational Behaviour*

We shall begin by analysing the evolution of Šestov views from his early years, focussing on his intellectual and spiritual development. Born in Kiev in 1866, Yehuda Leyb Shvartsman, who later took the pen-name of Lev Šestov, was one of seven children in a family of Russian Jews. His father, a self-made man, was a successful merchant, and a religious scholar, yet a free spirit. Despite his erudition and wit, he never took his son's interest in philosophy and literary writings seriously and hoped that Lev would follow in his footsteps and inherit the business. Šestov had indeed been involved in the family business almost throughout his entire life, even though he always viewed it as a burden and an obstacle to his vocation as a writer. Yet, he managed to combine his passionate philosophising with maintaining the family firm. John Bayley writes that, despite his irrationalist philosophy, Šestov "remained himself a model of sanity and common sense" – the phenomenon that Bayley assigns to Šestov's "remarkable and unique kind of cultural balance" (Bayley 1970: 2). He attributes its origin to Šestov's multiple identity as a Jew, a Russian and a European (*Ibid.*: 1). In a similar vein, Louis Shein (1991: 12) essentially describes Šestov as psychologically Russian, but thematically European. He sees Šestov as a product of Russian culture in some respects, but in others not fitting at all into the milieu of which he was a product.

Indeed, although born a Jew under the Russian autocracy, Šestov nevertheless had the benefit of an all-round education and was exposed to all the contemporary cultural trends as well as the vast philosophical and literary heritage of preceding generations. His cultural openness, sensitivity and inquisitive mind contributed to his main distinguishing feature of becoming profoundly international. He approached Russian literature with the extreme passion of Russian psychological irrationalism and at the same time with the shrewd European utilitarian attention to ideas as such. In his comparative cultural analysis not only did he take burning questions from the hands of Russian writers, as well as from the thinkers of all times and peoples, but he also transposed them across and beyond narrow national boundaries – to a superior plane of existential problems intrinsic to man *per se*.

Šestov received his education from gymnasiums in Kiev and Moscow, and in 1884 proceeded to read mathematics at Moscow University. He subsequently changed into the study of law and eventually wrote a dissertation in law which concerned the conditions of the Russian working class and the new Factory Legislation. Notably, this dissertation remained undefended because it was found too left-wing. Such political orientation was characteristic of Šestov's early years – like many advanced young men of his generation, he was at the time fond of ideas of social justice and full of idealism. An extract below from his teenage literary exercise – an attempt at writing fiction – speaks of his idealistic striving for fulfilment of his civic duty. The protagonist's contemplations,

> in the end could be reduced to defining a modern member of Russian intelligentsia. The idealists of the 1840s, the realists of the 1860s had their own agenda and fulfilled their goals... What is then to be done now? [...] He never doubted that his generation must say a new word and start a new endeavour (Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 11-12).

In the words of Baranova-Šestova, all the heroes of Šestov's stories of the time (there are ten drafts preserved in his archive) were such "poor talented idealistic youths, dreaming of 'saying a new word and starting a new endeavour'" (Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 11-12). Interestingly, they display some monarchic and distinctly Slavophilic attitudes, which clearly reflect Šestov's own juvenile beliefs, before he turned to socialism. Thus one of such heroes "worshipped Alexander II and his assistants in great reforms", and felt that "it is beyond doubt that Russia's future is grandiose. She will achieve all those great goals which had proved unconquerable for Western Europe, whose states and peoples went swiftly along the erroneous path which leads to destruction" (*Ibid.*: 14).

However, Šestov's revolutionary social tendencies quickly came to an end with the emergence of scientific Marxism. "I've been a revolutionary since the age of eight, much to my father's despair. I haven't ceased to be a revolutionary until much later, when 'scientific' socialism, Marxism, emerged", were Šestov's own words reported by his disciple Benjamine Fondane (1982: 116). Unlike many of his fellow-thinkers, such as, for instance, N. Berdjaev or S. Bulgakov, who moved from socialist strivings of 'scientific Marxism' to a new religious search, resulting in the answers offered by Christianity, Šestov found this outcome unsatisfactory. His search continued, and his faith in the 'living' omnipotent God of the Bible as opposed to the 'dead' God of philosophers reduced to an empty syllogism, led him to inventing a different kind of philosophical discourse – a 'philosophy of tragedy', advanced in a brilliant literary style, and deeply rooted in, above all, the Russian, literary tradition. For Šestov it was first of all Dostoevskij (and to a large extent Nietzsche) who taught him to move away from the 'external' ways of solving mankind's problems, towards the plane of spiritual quest, contemplating the undying 'cursed' questions of tragic human predicament.

As a result, Šestov quite quickly broke free from imitative and socially oriented writing and reinvented himself as a fresh and original voice focused entirely on the existential and rebelling against scientific discourse with its proclamation of 'self-evident truths'. His books and articles, which he started to write in the mid-1890s at first took the form of literary criticism, although increasingly turning into philosophical essays, full of fragmented aphoristic discourse. The heroes of his essays were thinkers of the last three thousand years, whose lives Šestov invariably interpreted through the prism of his own tragic paradigm, by finding a crisis point in their biographies. This dramatic turn would lead them, via catharsis and total rebirth of beliefs, from reason to faith, to the second dimension of thought. More generally, Šestov interpreted Original Sin as man's opting for reason against faith, and saw human reason as a suffocating and deadly instrument which paralyzed human will and enslaved mankind with rationalist dogmas. In order to break free one has to reach the bottom of despair (where true philosophy can be born), reject reason, and in this new irrationalist state to find a path to salvation. But fighting against reason by rational means, on the territory of that very reason is hardly a winning task, and so Šestov

> after a solemn 'funeral' of rationalism in his book, returns again, in his next book, to the critique of rationalism, which, as it were, got resurrected in the interim. This is because

> having destroyed within himself one layer of rationalism, Šestov discovers, again within himself, another, more profound, layer of the same rationalism (Zen'kovskij 1999, II: 367).

It is reasonable to suppose that Šestov's initial striving to write fiction (whether prosaic or poetic) which fell short of realisation (and according to Czeslaw Milosz may have become Šestov's hidden personal drama) eventually found its way into his singular narrative where he merged literature with philosophy more profoundly than any other Russian thinker. On the other hand, his life-path fitted into the very spirit of the times in Russia, for as Edith Clowes (2004: 13) explains "Russian philosophical modernity has inhabited the edge between mystical, associative, 'poetic' thinking and representative, categorizing 'scientific' thinking". Clowes asserts that

> in the flowering of Russian philosophy around 1900, and beyond into the twentieth century, this conflict led to [...] a rich, compelling scepticism about all absolute categories of truth, logic, essential being, knowledge, and identity that both religious and scientific types of discourse often have imposed on a complex world (Clowes 2004: 13).

In Russian philosophy at the time "these categories become a matter of interpretation and negotiation" with an extensive use of "the logic of poetic tropes and asystematic genres" (*Ibid.*: 13-14). In this interplay of opposite approaches Šestov, with his conviction that philosophy is art rather than science, clearly took an extreme stand. However, as Clowes (2004: 144, fn. 15) stresses, Šestov's anarchism and nihilism operate strictly within the philosophical field and deal exclusively with the inner, spiritual sphere.

Thus, once again (after Bayley's remark above), we encounter a scholarly opinion which stresses the rebellious nature of Šestov's philosophy exclusively in the plane of thought, not extending beyond it, which points precisely to what we refer to as his peculiar 'duality'. In this connection, it is interesting to recall also Lev Tolstoy's opinion of Šestov as a 'litterateur' and not a 'philosopher'. Vladimir Papernyj explained this assessment by Šestov's belonging to the Modernist discourse, which at the time united the Symbolists with the seekers of new religious philosophies, and was generally steeped in striving for universal synthesis. However, the life-creating qualities of the Symbolists were certainly alien to Šestov who evidently distinguished very clearly between his philosophical writings and his real life behaviour and views, despite his all-pervasive literature-centered approach, characteristic of his thought (including religious thought as well).

Declared at different times a nihilist, sceptic, and decadent – the labels which Šestov always fiercely resisted – in everyday life he displayed a distinct tendency to reconcile, to combine the incompatible, and to coexist in peace, but never at the cost of compromising his own stance. While, in Šestov's eyes, between reason and faith, Athens and Jerusalem, no compromise was possible, in his reality he kept finding compromises between different, sometimes opposite, extremes, and managed, by his benevolence and kindness, to attract people of extremely diverse persuasions. Thus Evgenija Gercyk (1973: 103; cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 94) who stresses his down-to-earth stability ("so business-like

and grounded [...], so unlike a poet-philosopher with a bird-like manner who is ready to flutter up [...]. In his whole figure there was simplicity and monumentality at the same time"), recollects: "all these people, who at times fiercely argued with one another, were at one in their sympathy to Šestov, in their special tenderness towards him" (Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 94). Similarly, S. Bulgakov noted:

> It was impossible not to love Šestov, not to respect him as a bold seeker of truth, even if you did not share his outlook. L.I. had an irresistible personal charisma. It was impossible not to feel joy when meeting him, as I witnessed in the case of many who had nothing in common with him intellectually. Maybe this is because of his amazing heart, his enchanting kindness and benevolence[2].

The same impression is created when reading his letters to his extended family, whom he always tried to support and reassure, even in the worst of times, suggesting constructive business-like solutions to various crises. This points, surprisingly, to Šestov's overwhelming rationality in real life as opposed to the irrationalist nature of his philosophical writings; if you like – to the 'centrist' behaviour as opposed to 'extremist' ideas.

2. *Religious Thought: Between Judaism and Christianity. Synthesis as Reconciliation*

An illustration of the above is, for instance, the way Šestov managed to reconcile his orthodox Jewish upbringing (which forbids marrying out) with having a Russian orthodox wife, Anna Berezovskaja. He did this by keeping his marriage secret from his parents. Notably, his older half-sister Dora disobeyed their father's will and openly married a gentile, which resulted in the father cutting any connections with her. Šestov apparently tried to do the same: in 1896 he had the intention of marrying a gentile (Nastja Malakhova-Mirovič), but, unlike Dora, did not dare to overcome his parents' violent opposition. But just a year later – in 1897 – he did go against their will, but only revealed the existence of his family to his mother after his father's death in 1914 (However, a family legend has it that his mother knew all along, whereas his father genuinely did not and never found out).

Equally telling is Šestov's confessional choice, which, while remaining still somewhat obscure to scholars, clearly points at his acceptance of both Old and New Testaments as the ultimate source of truth. Thus shortly before his death Šestov wrote in a letter to Sergej Bulgakov that to him "the oppositions between the Old and New Testaments always seemed imaginary[3]. He also kept an open mind about other religions and towards the end of his life became very interested in Hinduism. When he died there were two books by his bedside: The Bible and a book on Hinduism: *The Vedanta system*.

Various sources stress the importance of Šestov's Jewish milieu and the impact of it on his entire personality. In particular, Czeslaw Milosz (1977: 114) points out that "in Kiev,

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[2] Bulgakov 1939: 305, 319; cited in Lovckij 1960: 125.

[3] Šestov's letter to Sergej Bulgakov of 26.10.1938. Cited in: Baranova-Šestova 1983, II: 193.

Šestov absorbed Jewish religious literature, including legends and folklore, at an early age". Similarly, Sidney Monas (1969: VIII) is tempted "to see a connection between Šestov's work and the Jewish mystical tradition that must have been somewhere an intimate part of his background and milieu" and tries to assign Šestov, quite boldly, in philosophical terms to Hassidism, or rather to its spirit. Interestingly, Baranova-Šestova mentions young Šestov's fascination with a poor relative who lived in the Švarcmans' household and kept all the rituals of Judaic faith. At the same time, much later in life, Šestov expressed (to Aaron Štejnberg) his definite rejection of practising Judaic traditions as being a manifestation of a scholastic and hollow interpretation of the obligations of religious faith. The very spirit of fastidiousness, of incredible precision and thorough diligence in Šestov's view ran into contradiction with the nature of Truth. Yet, being provocatively labelled by Štejnberg a Jew under a Hellenistic disguise caused Šestov to protest. Furthermore, after observing the interactions between Šestov and his mother, Štejnberg was struck by the overwhelming power of Šestov's Judaic background and Jewish semiotics of behaviour (and talks in his memoirs about the illusory nature of Šestov's 'groundlessness' in the light of such a firm ground of Šestov's parental hearth).

On the other hand, Vasilij Zen'kovskij (1999, II: 371) points to a number of Šestov's statements testifying to his "acceptance of the Christian revelation". Noteworthy is also Baranova-Šestova's account of Šestov's incidental encounter with the Russian Orthodox Church in his childhood:

> Once he accidently entered a Russian Orthodox church. He was overwhelmed by the silence, the illuminated icon lamps, and the whole atmosphere, to the point of regretting that it wasn't his church, where, he thought, it would be so nice to pray[4].

He compared unfavourably the simplicity and poverty of the synagogue with the festive religious ceremonies of Russian Orthodoxy. At the time he could have been easily converted, he confessed, if there had been some enthusiastic monk to attempt the conversion. It is interesting to mention in this connection that, years later, Šestov's daughters by his Russian Orthodox wife were baptised with his consent.

Thus, as Sidney Monas (1969: XIV) suggests "Šestov was, in some not very orthodox sense, a Jew and a Christian". However, given the supra-temporal – and for many anti-historical – flavour of Šestov's writings, Fedor de Schloezer's approach of placing him essentially beyond, or rather above, narrow national and confessional boundaries (de Schloezer 1922: 86), is more readily accepted by the scholarly world. For our purposes, it is important that, once again, we witness in Šestov a possible 'duality' of faith, or at least a reconciliation of different religious doctrines.

In Vladimir Papernyj's interpretation of Šestov's philosophy, the synthesis inherent in Russian Modernism is not a characteristic of Šestov's thought, which nevertheless reveals a

[4] Unpublished part of Lovckij's memoirs. Cited in: Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 5

common religious experience as a kernel of the conscience of every thinker under Šestov's study (Papernyj 2005). Yet, as we saw, synthesis is to be found in Šestov's life strategy and semiotics of behaviour in the form of rational reconciliation of opposites. As we shall now see, the resulting sober adjustment, without ever stepping over the line of his own convictions, proved an effective survival mechanism during the turbulent years of the revolutions of 1917.

3. *Revolutionary Years: Survival Strategies and Evolution of Political Convictions*

As German Lovckij (1960) recalls, from early on, Shestov used to publish his works in a wide range of literary outlets of often opposite political orientations (save obviously for the anti-Semitic ones) – from left Socialist Revolutionaries ("Esery") to liberal "Russkaja mysl'" and "Mir Iskusstva". To any questions about his possible fear of being tainted by them he replied with a joke that, instead, they should be afraid of being tainted by him (Lovckij 1960). His reputation as philosophy's e*nfant terrible*, his mental battles against literary and philosophical giants, against Necessity itself gained him real popularity in Russia, especially amongst the young. These battles resonated with Romanticism, while being conducted with Modernist wit and brilliant literary style, yet seeking rather than dismantling the Divine. When Šestov came to Moscow with his wife and daughters in the autumn of 1914 with the intention to settle in Russia for good, his place in Russian intellectual life was firmly established. "During these years, Šestov earned himself a name: journals are welcoming him, a full collection of his writings is in print, he is being widely read", wrote Gercyk (1973). Come 1917, Šestov turned out to have many fans among the revolutionaries – the fact he mentions often in the letters to his extended family to calm down their fears and concerns.

At the start of World War I, Šestov believed in a swift and successful outcome, trying to share the "elevated mood"[5] reigning in Russia at the time, as stated in his letter of December 1914. Almost a year later, his mood is still buoyant:

> Personally, I look at the future with great optimism. It seems to me that the Germans, despite all their success, are craving peace more than all the other participants in the War, and will soon confess to that. Then, of course, things will turn for the better and in 3-4 months the War will end successfully for us (Šestov's letter to the Lovckijs of 25.09.15, from Kiev. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 140).

Baranova-Šestova claims that this surprising optimism was shared at the time by all Šestov's friends. Another year passes, but the mood is still the same: "Here for some reason there reigns a conviction that in the summer the war will be over. I agree: if not in the summer, in the autumn then it will definitely come to an end"[6]. But in the winter of 1916-1917 a personal tragedy strikes – Šestov's illegitimate son Sergej, of whom Šestov was very fond,

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[5] Šestov's letter to Fanja Lovckij of 17.12.14. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 135.

[6] Šestov's letter to the Lovckijs of 07.05.16, from Kiev. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983 , I: 142.

was killed at the front. However, not only his own, but also everybody's life was shaken up, when Russia underwent tectonic changes in 1917.

After the February revolution, Šestov, in his daughter's words, "did not share in the common enthusiasm, largely spent time indoors, sitting in his study, sad and pensive" (Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 150), yet his letters to his relatives reflect a festive mood of the "great and bloodless" political change, when "all the huge country [...] calmly moved from the old to the new"[7]. By contrast to the life-shaking turbulence in Petrograd ("you are making history there")[8], the life in Moscow seems unchanged to him: "everything went ever so smoothly"; "there is a perfect order now in Moscow. With God's help, all will return to normal: if only they could hold out on the frontline, here – at home – we will find a way"[9]. He praises the returning civic order, approves of the government which "gained everyone's trust"[10] and hopes that "God willing, things will continue in the same way, and German possible advance at our front will face the country organised again"[11]; "the war, evidently, is rapidly coming to an end"[12]. He believes in the peaceful development, in Russia's strength to overcome all historical difficulties ("hitherto Russia always kept her honour and came out victorious")[13], and places his hopes (like many people in the country) on the Constituent Assembly – at least according to his reassuring letters to his family. In the range of opposite opinions in Šestov's milieu – from Nikolaj Berdjaev's total scepticism and anticipation of the bloody catastrophe, and Andrej Belyj's ecstasy about the Provisional Government, and regarding Kerenskij "the new man", Baranova-Šestova places her father in the middle, but closer to Berdiaev's apocalyptic end (Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 153-154).

After a hopeful start to the summer, when Šestov even allows himself a light-hearted irony ("we should probably all become SRs![14] [...] One hears they will recruit everyone and pay wages, taking off the wealthy and paying out to everyone. [...] Soon everything will be great for everybody")[15], he feels much more disenchanted. Šestov criticises Berdiaev's intense involvement into politics and radicalisation of his views (conservatism, intolerance to the left wing and active collaboration with chauvinistic periodicals): "nowadays everyone is radicalised – and what will come of it, is hard to say. Someone will force us all to reconcile, and it would be lucky if this someone is of sane mind!"[16], he writes to Michail Geršenzon in August. His disillusionment continues into the autumn: "So far things are very-very sad.

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7 Šestov's letter to his mother of 7(20).03.17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 151.

8 Šestov's letter to Aleksei Remizov of 24.04.17. See Šestov, Remizov 1992: 124.

9 Šestov's letter to Aleksei Remizov of 13.03.17. See Šestov, Remizov 1992: 123.

10 Šestov's letter to Fanja Lovckij of 15(28).03.17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 151.

11 Šestov's letter to Fanja Lovckij of 6(19).03.17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 150-151.

12 Šestov's letter to his mother of 19.04 (2.05).17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 152.

13 Šestov's letter to his mother of 25.05 (7.06).17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 154.

14 Members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

15 Šestov's letter to Aleksei Remizov of 27.06.17. See Šestov, Remizov 1992: 124.

16 Šestov's letter to Michail Geršenzon of 6.08.17. See Šestov 1992: 101.

Everyone hoped that the revolution would develop differently; although – why did one hope? This is unclear", Šestov says in a letter to the Lovckijs in early October[17]. Two weeks later, he conveys the atmosphere of fear, anguish and uncertainty in his letter to Remizov, and confesses to his own helplessness and disorientation with respect to political prognosis:

> Forthcoming evacuation! Although I don't believe that the Germans will come here – they must be no less exhausted than we are – but still it is scary. [...] Here life is as hateful as everywhere else. We cannot see or predict the future, and the present is repulsive. Everyone is full of anger, people like aggressive dogs want to tear each other to shreds, and it gets worse by the day. Probably in Europe, especially in Germany, it is no better, but it's of little consolation[18].

The same extremely gloomy mood, finally devoid of any optimistic prognoses, continues after the Bolshevik coup. Now Šestov's views are akin to Berdiaev's earlier anticipations, when the latter maintained the idea of a bloody continuation to the start (no matter how bloodless) of any revolution. Unlike old revolutionaries expecting a birth of bright future from the chaos, he now states that "from real chaos only a nasty reaction can be born", even in the event of the total German defeat[19]. Šestov laments the unscrupulousness of the masses, and feels that "all the best promises of the revolution are now being trodden into mud"[20]. Furthermore, he now suspects that "in the summer [...] we'll all be forced to leave Russia"[21]. Notably, he tries, not without success, to work in order to muffle the oppressiveness of the political upheavals outside.

In June 1918, the hardship of life in Moscow becomes overwhelming, and Šestov with his family leave for Kiev, where life is still bearable. At the time, Kiev was the capital of Ukraine, controlled by the Germans, but it changed hands several times in the course of 1919 – falling to Symon Petliura, then the Bolsheviks, then the White Army, making life ever more intolerable. The Šestovs settled in a big house of the Balachovskijs (Šestov's sister Sofia and her husband), who were able to emigrate from the country soon after. Šestov's family, left behind, shared the house with various other visitors – effectively political refugees – including the family of the late composer Alexandr Skrjabin. But the Civil War, having soon moved to the south, caught up with them in Kiev. The Šestovs then started their attempts to emigrate and to join the rest of Šestov's family who had been living abroad, trapped there earlier by the war.

During his life under the Bolsheviks in Kiev, Šestov enjoyed a somewhat privileged position due to his popularity among some of the revolutionary leaders, as mentioned above.

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17 Šestov's letter to the Lovckijs of 9.10.17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 156.

18 Šestov's letter to Aleksei Remizov of 25.10.17. Šestov, Remizov 1992: 125.

19 Šestov's letter to Fanja Lovckij of 1(14).12.17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 157.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

In his own words, reported to Fondane, the Bolsheviks hoped for Šestov's cooperation, as he was a revolutionary in philosophy just as they were in politics (Fondane 1982: 108). As a consequence, it appears that his position was precarious, for he clearly had to walk the tightrope between the strictures of the new regime and his own convictions. Thus, as Baranova-Šestova writes, quoting Fondane, who documented Šestov's personal accounts:

> he was once invited to a public meeting where Marx's ideas would be discussed. He did not want to go, *but there was nothing to be done* [highlighting is mine, O.T.]. He enjoyed great respect in Kiev, even greater after the revolution than before it. Thanks to that, his flat was not expropriated (Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 164).

At the meeting, the chairman said that the revolution would sweep all dissident thinkers, including the ancients, if they refuse to cooperate. Šestov objected, stressing the fleeting nature of all revolutions as opposed to supra-temporal character of the great philosophers and their teachings. In his own words, the protectorship of his powerful admirers was sufficient for him to dare coming out with such sentiments. Šestov also gave public speeches and lectures on philosophy at the People's University, and was a member of the Scientific Committee for publishing philosophical literature. "Thanks to my position in the scientific and literary world, I managed to find work. Wherever I went, I always found the audience ready to assist me in any endeavour. Clearly, people often pay back with the good for the good", he wrote to his mother in May of 1919[22].

Instructively, the lectures Šestov gave then concerned predominantly ancient philosophy ("The main philosophical problems in historical perspective: from Plato to Descartes"; "History of the Greek philosophy, from Thales to Epicureans"). It is also noteworthy that his later writings, which gravitated much more to philosophy than literature, were going to be published by the Bolsheviks, but only on condition of Šestov providing a preface, no matter how short, in defence of the Marxist doctrine. Importantly, Šestov refused, and the publication fell through. Another publication – with a print-run intended for as many as ten thousand copies, the unprecedented figure for Šestov – with the Jewish People's Publishing, did not take place either. In the autumn of 1919 the family started preparations for emigration, to flee from the horrors of the new regime. They moved to Yalta, intending to leave the country by sea, and get to Western Europe via Constantinople. However, Šestov took the precaution of finding a job at Tavricheskij University in Simferopol, in case the permission to leave was not granted. He sought the post of privat-docent in philosophy, acting through his friend – a local professor – Ivan Četverikov, with the assistance also of Sergej Bulgakov. He did obtain the position, but did not start on his new job, because permission to emigrate was granted. Šestov and family left Yalta early in January of 1920, and a new page in Šestov's life began. However, the title did come useful to him when in Paris, where he got some contract lecturing hours in philosophy at the Russian extension of the

[22] Šestov's letter to his mother of 25.05.19. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 165.

Sorbonne. It was also in emigration, shortly after his departure from Bolshevik Russia, that he produced the work on Russian Bolshevism with a severe critique of the new regime[23]. Let us now look at this and other works of Šestov, written in the revolutionary years.

4. *Historical or Anti-Historical? Šestov's Writings Around 1917*

German Lovckij (1960) asserts that Šestov was always distant from politics, showed little interest in it (although he always disliked Hegel and Marx). His writings indeed very seldom address contemporary political issues. This led many to the claim of his apparent unconcern with the topical burning questions of his day, whether of a social or generally historical nature. Thus Semën Frank (1908) wrote,

> I don't know of any contemporary writer, with the exception of course of Tolstoy, who in his interests and searching, would be so independent of the spirit of the times, who, in vacuous expanses filled only with his own ideas, thinks so much outside the atmosphere of every new trend, as Lev Šestov does (Frank 1908).

Evgeniia Gercyk (1973) was even more forceful in her assessment: "exceptionally perceptive with respect to one's inner world, Lev Isaakovič could not sense the spirit of the time". Vladimir Papernyj (2005) is also one of those who interpreted Šestov's stance as "anti-historical". Yet, such anti-historicism, as Šestov's contemporary Boris de Schloezer remarked, was related to Šestov's "exceptional perception of time and space", whereby "the past as such did not exist – it was in the present. Violence and injustice once committed over Socrates did not constitute a historical event of more than twenty centuries ago, [...] but took place here and now, in front of Šestov's very eyes – this was still happening and would go on happening..." (de Schloezer 2016: 438).

In this sense, as, for instance, K.D. Pomerancev noted, history for Šestov was largely "a device" to speak "not about the past, but about the present – about the most vital issues of human soul, the insoluble questions which modernity poses to man" (Pomerancev 2016: 53). Moreover, in Šestov's terms, only by partaking in the sufferings of historical figures, by sharing their pain, could one truly philosophize and search for the way out of the horrors of existence. As Boris Dynin observed, Šestov's perception of history, where "there is no invariant in time and space", is in grasping in Job's lamentation a dimension of truth, which "will be revealed to you through the suffering and joy of the past and future generations" (Dynin 2016: 36). Thus "Šestov's heroes are souls experiencing their own distinctive individual horrors which are not amenable to consolations of reason" (*Ibid.*). These are personal inner horrors, a soul's reaction to the tragic human predicament.

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[23] It was published in French in "Mercure de France" in September of 1920 (Chestoff 1920), but the Russian original never appeared at the time (see the details of the story in Baranova-Šestova 1983, I: 189).

At the times of major socio-political shifts such horrors become an unescapable everyday reality. Having lived through the nightmares of the Russian revolutions of 1905 and then of 1917, followed by the brutal civil war, and the drastic change of political regime in the country, which forced him out into emigration, Šestov was clearly affected by contemporary history, and did not stay away from contemplating these tragic events. In the words of Evgenij Lundberg, who remained loyal to the revolution and had a successful career in the USSR, "the Revolution horrified him. He peered into it, but could not discern its essence. In Kiev, he was guarded from small and big disasters by N. Vengrov. At that time, Šestov was not directly hostile, but remained silent for long periods of time, and his face darkened as if from an illness" (Lundberg 1922: 76-77; cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 166-167). In his *Diary of Thoughts*, entry of 17 October 1919, Šestov wrote, "never before did my mind work so stubbornly, strenuously and ceaselessly as in these horrific, bloody days; and never before – so fruitlessly" (Šestov 1976: 235). However, "those forms of truth that are unavailable in the flux of the immediate" (Freeman 1993: 224), become attainable in hindsight by those who had lived through traumatic events. Thus, as a result of this tormenting period, once abroad, in emigration, Šestov produced the above pamphlet on Russian Bolshevism, where (to Lundberg's horror) he expressed an openly hostile attitude to the new regime.

The very fact of producing this substantial piece of political analysis is in itself a testimony to Šestov's profound involvement in historical process and political discourse, and challenges the ideas of him remaining outside of historical time. Moreover, in his private correspondence he talks of his civic duty ("I am writing popular brochures and articles. [...] The brochure was not accepted. Probably there is no demand for it – perhaps it's badly written. It thus turns out that not everyone is destined to discharge his civic duty. This duty was the only drive behind writing this")[24], and writes a proclamation for the Kiev Jewish anti-pogrom committee on their request ("they want to establish an anti-pogrom committee to fight through words against the pogrom propaganda, and have involved me into this as well")[25]. On the other hand, everything else Šestov worked on during the years of political disturbance in Russia leading to 1917 up to his emigration in 1920, not only stays away from political history, but also marks Šestov's transition from the literary-philosophical history, characteristic of his early period, to purely philosophical writing.

Indeed, before returning to Moscow from abroad in 1914, Šestov started his work on what later became a book of essays entitled *Potestas Clavium*, which largely signified his transition from literary criticism to religious philosophy. In this book he lays the foundations for his subsequent philosophical works, viewing the history of Christianity as moving from Jerusalem to Athens, from faith to reason, which in the end enslaved mankind and substituted the 'living' God of the Bible by the 'dead' god of the philosophers. Despite

[24] Šestov's letter to Aleksei Remizov of 27.06.17. See Šestov, Remizov 1992: 124. Notice an evident continuity here with Šestov's youthful (fictional) writings, quoted above, where the (clearly autobiographical) protagonist is striving precisely to discharge his civic duty.

[25] Šestov's letter to Michail Geršenzon of 8 (21).06.19. See Šestov 1992: 103.

the lack of the manuscript, which got trapped overseas because of the war, Šestov continued working on *Potestas Clavium* while in Russia, and produced some other philosophical works as well. In 1915-1916, he became a member of the Moscow Psychological Society, where he gave talks. In June 1916, Šestov wrote an article on Vjačeslav Ivanov entitled *Vjačeslav Velikolepnyj*, which appeared in "Russkaja Mysl'" in October of the same year, and was given as a talk in November at the Moscow religious-philosophical Society. Since then Šestov took an active interest in Plotin, whom he alleged to be the favourite thinker for V. Ivanov. In 1917, Šestov published a major article on Edmund Husserl – *Memento mori* – in "Voprosy filosofii i psichologii" (which was subsequently, in 1926, published in Paris in French). He had known about Husserl since 1908, but his active interest in the German philosopher in 1917 might have been rekindled due to Gustav Špet who was Husserl's admirer, and at the same time a big fan of Šestov's writings and ideas. Šestov remained active throughout 1917, and published various aphorisms in different journals (in the collection *Vetv'*, in the annual "Mysl' i Slovo" edited by Špet, and in "Skify"). In his letters to his family in the autumn of 1917, Šestov stresses his attempts at working despite political upheavals. It is also clear that he realised the oppressive nature of the new regime: "I am trying to write as much as possible, and to publish while it is still possible"[26].

All this shows that despite the hardship and socio-political chaos around him, Šestov never gave up writing, but his academic focus, characteristically, was far from the contemporary issues. Instead, it concentrated on religion and philosophy in historical perspective, starting from antiquity. His main idea which would appear again and again in his diverse essays remained the same – reflecting his ultimate struggle against necessity through disavowing human reason in the form of shallow rationalism, in favour of faith. Does this mean that his thought was seeking an escapist refuge in metaphysical contemplations? Given a salvationist character of his philosophical search, it becomes evident that his path did not lead him away from suffering into the hiding place of the romantic imagination or to problems of a qualitatively different order of magnitude. In his own eyes, he was getting to the bottom of that very suffering, desperately trying to find a cure.

What is (Russian) Bolshevism?, by contrast, was fully contemporary. In it Šestov exposed, in particular, the dangerous demagogical vacuum behind Bolshevik slogans, that is to say, their dogmatism and ideological impotence, where, paradoxically, – instead of materialism and positivism – idealism is at work. He wrote,

> Russia will save Europe – all the "ideological" supporters of Bolshevism are deeply convinced of this. The reason she will save Europe is because, unlike the latter, she believes in the magical power of words. Strange though it may seem, but Bolsheviks, who fanatically profess materialism, in fact are the most naïve idealists. For them the real conditions of human life do not exist. They are convinced that words have a supernatural power. Words will make things happen – one just has to put one's faith in words

[26] Šestov's letter to the Lovckijs of 22.11.17. Cited in Baranova-Šestova 1983, 1: 149.

> bravely and fearlessly. They have done. And decrees are pouring down in their thousands (Šestov 1920b: 7-8)[27].

These words of Šestov on the new political system in Russia can be instructively compared to his earlier, non-political, writings about Russian cultural history and its specifics in comparison to Western-European culture:

> With few exceptions Russian writers really despise the pettiness of the West. Even those who have admired Europe most have done so because they failed most completely to understand her. They did not want to understand her. That is why we have always taken over European ideas in such fantastic forms. Take the sixties for example. With its loud ideas of sobriety and modest outlook, it was a most drunken period. Those who awaited the New Messiah and the Second Advent read Darwin and dissected frogs (Šestov 1977a, II: §45).

> [...] Europe had dropped miracles ages ago; she contented herself with ideals. It is we in Russia who will go on confusing miracles with ideals, as if the two were identical, whereas they have nothing to do with each other. As a matter of fact, just because Europe had ceased to believe in miracles, and realised that all human problems resolve down to mere arrangements here on earth, ideas and ideals had been invented. But the Russian bear crept out of his hole and strolled to Europe for the elixir of life, the flying carpet, the seven-leagued shoes, and so on, thinking in all his naïveté that railways and electricity were signs which clearly proved that the old nurse never told a lie in her fairy tales... All this happened just at the moment when Europe had finally made away with alchemy and astrology, and started on the positive researches resulting in chemistry and astronomy (Šestov 1977a, I: § 22).

This demonstrates the continuity of Šestov's thought in his integral vision of Russian mentality and cultural specifics as essentially irrationalist, when viewed against European rationalist background. Yet, this irrationalism, while it remains in the metaphysical sphere, carries a positive message for him, as he connects Russian freedom (i.e. being free from what he perceives as European cultural dogmas) to the fearless character of Russian literature. However, irrationalism exercised by the Bolsheviks in real life, by contrast, removes freedom and becomes truly destructive[28].

Importantly, this daring uncultured irrationalism of Russian literature of which Šestov writes with a mixture of irony and fascination at the time of his *Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, resonates with the essence of Russian religious philosophy, as formulated by Vasilij Zen'kovskij: the metaphysical being above the physical. Or more precisely: in human life, in order for it to be meaningful, the physical has to be sanctified (or illuminated)

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[27] In the republication available at the website of the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences the variant *Čto takoe russkij bol'ševizm?* is used.

[28] See, for instance, the quotation below referred to in footnote 39.

by the metaphysical. Notably, this stance leads to a bias towards the 'heavenly'. It survives the tragic upheavals of the 20th century and re-emerges again in contemporary Russian writings, of predominantly Slavophilic orientation, claiming that Russian history over the course of one thousand years brought about "very much in order to aid understanding the world, but very little that helps us live in it"[29]. The same problematic interplay of 'earthly' and 'heavenly' plays a crucial role in Šestov's own contemplations. Thus in his seminal work *In Job's Balances* published in 1929 Šestov tells a fable of the father of philosophy Thales, who fell into a well while looking at the stars, and a Thracian girl who laughed at him for wanting to watch the stars, but neglecting to look under his own feet. Thales was thus taught a bitter lesson, and ever since people look down before looking up. In other words, without a firm physical foundation, our metaphysical ponderings are worth nothing and lead nowhere. Šestov used this myth for polemical purposes to disavow the despotic role of science, and reason more generally, in human life and cognition (but it is not difficult to see the relevance of this stance extending to the above 'polemics' between Russian and European approaches to existence).

However, in his piece on Bolshevism he takes effectively an opposite stance by denouncing the Russian propensity to neglect the 'earthly' in favour of the 'heavenly': "It now seems that everyone is aiming to adhere to the ideology of those Russian writers who [...] regarded it as their civic duty not to allow the heavenly kingdom on earth, and strove to fight first of all against the ideology of the Western-European philistinism" (Šestov 1920b: 36). Without settling properly here, on earth, one cannot reach to the stars, it is a fatally destructive path, Šestov proclaims in 1920. He thus blames Russian intelligentsia for their myopic naivety and castigates (just as in the excerpt above) an essentially Slavophilic stance of Russian writers in their distorted vision of Western European civilization, preoccupied (in its 'pettiness' and 'philistinism') by the 'earthly' arrangements. Dismissing and despising such an attitude as too down-to-earth is, in Šestov's view, hypocrisy which results in no kingdom at all – either on earth or in heaven. In his notebooks and drafts of early 1920, which contain some formative ideas of the pamphlet on Russian Bolshevism, he traces the horrors of Bolshevik revolution to the traditions of serfdom, of exalting lack of freedom into a virtue:

> The nightmare of today's Russia is only a corollary of the past centuries when people were raised with the ideal of serfdom. Not only simple folk, but even our intelligentsia do not know and do not want to know what is freedom. Slaves of yesterday, having acquired state power today, immediately turned into self-assured and obtuse old-time constables and gendarmes, with the only difference that they call themselves commissars and Soviets (March 28, 1920, Geneva)[30].

[29] The words of a character from Zakhar Prilepin's novel *San'kja* (2006), Chapter 8 at <http://sankya.ru/chapters/8.html> (latest access: 13.12.16).

[30] See Piron 2010: 388, where Šestov's deciphered manuscripts of various years are given.

Thus, if in his *Apotheosis* the aforementioned Russian neglect for the 'earthly' is compensated by Šestov's effective admiration of Russian literary daring, in 1920 it is a pure and bitter critique. If you like, Šestov sides here with Russian Westernisers, as if criticising that very ideal of the ultimate philosopher who should not be afraid to look at the stars even if he may fall into a well.

Such a change of perspective can be explained by Šestov's horror at the bloody reality of the Bolshevik revolution. In fact, it was not until 1934 – the time of his other openly political piece – that Šestov linked that philistinism (despised by Russian cultural tradition), which effectively implies the spiritual crisis of mankind without God, to the 'barbaric' victory of both Bolshevism and fascism. After the piece on Bolshevism of 1920, this article of 1934, written in response to the rise of Nazism, was, also exceptionally for Šestov, another work on the burning issues of the day rather than philosophical matters as such. It was entitled *The Menacing Barbarians of Today* and was published in the journal *Aryan Path*. However, unlike the work of 1920, it presented a bird's eye view on politics, putting it into a metaphysical framework. Once again Šestov attacked necessity and crude force which, for him, come from reason, and defended freedom which he linked to faith; he sided with Plotin against Hegel[31].

In 1920, however, Šestov is extremely concrete and makes almost no transgression to the metaphysical (except in a negative context above). However, when he does refer to a broader framework – that of history and religion rather than politics per se – it is vital, as it provides the backbone for the entire piece, described by Šestov himself as "a critique of Bolshevism from a Biblical perspective")[32]. This is facilitated through the idea already expressed in his *Diary of Thoughts* in 1919 when comparing the revolutionary chaos to the Confusion of Babylon, and assigning the folly in which Europe had submerged through the war, and then Russia through its fatal revolutions, to the powers beyond human control:

> But it's not just Bolsheviks, is it, who turned out to be suicidal? [...] In 1914 the monarchs of Europe suddenly pounced on each other for the glory of Western European democracy, which they hated most of all in the world. [...] It is as if fate hovered over them, proving the truth of the Russian proverb: you cannot escape your destiny. When nations are destined to die, people and even entire nations do everything themselves to hasten their death. We are experiencing clearly some era of eclipse. [...] people for five years have been exterminating each other and their accumulated wealth, and brought blooming Europe to a state that reminds of the worst medieval times. How could this happen? Why did people sink into such folly? [...] We are faced with the immutable fact that people in 1914 lost their minds. Maybe angry Lord "mixed their tongues", or maybe there were "natural" reasons at work – but one way or another, people, cultured people of the 20th century, themselves, out of the blue, caused themselves incredible misfortunes. Monarchy killed

[31] See Šestov 1934.

[32] See Lundberg 2016: 319.

> monarchy, democracy killed democracy; in Russia, socialists and revolutionaries are killing and have almost killed both socialism and revolution.
>
> What will happen next? Is the period of the eclipse over, has the angry Lord removed the folly from people already, or are we destined to live for a long time in mutual misunderstanding and to continue the terrible deed of self-destruction? When I was still in Russia, I kept asking myself this question and did not know how to answer it (Šestov 1920b).

This metaphysical stance, in our view, is predicated on Šestov's direct involvement in these devastating events, especially on the massive scale of distraction in the country. "The horrors which I saw... Going to the university to give lectures, I was avoiding crowded streets and made my way through back alleys", Šestov confessed to Fondane (Fondane 1982: 108). These horrors of the revolutionary years must have opened for Šestov (who was already attuned to the inner existential horrors) an abyss of the ugly dark underbelly of human nature. In his letter to Geršenzon of August 1917, Šestov already alludes to the superior power behind the forces of history: "I can see clearly that fate has already taken hold, and everybody, even those who think of themselves and are thought of by others as history movers – like Ribot or Lloyd George – are only puppets in the hands of history"[33]. This frame of thought fits in with Geneviève Piron's words that for Šestov it is the illusion of human control over history that seduces man into politics thus eroding his spiritual life[34]. And yet, as Piron maintains, Šestov's writings show a direct engagement with historical upheavals[35]. Nikita Struve sees a paradox here (or, if you like, another pointer to Šestov's duality) – in that Šestov demonstrates such a shrewd vision of the revolution (as expressed in his piece on Russian Bolshevism), while at the same time, in philosophical terms, refusing to acknowledge the power of the empirical (Struve 1996: 75). According to Struve, Šestov's recoil from politics is due to the fact that his political philosophy contradicted his own main philosophical idea: the irrational here, on earth, is synonymous with evil, whereas in the sphere of the spiritual it is rationalism which can be most destructive. In this respect Šestov's pamphlet on Bolshevism is instructive as it refers to the Bolsheviks as irrationalists who "do not even believe in reason" and whom Šestov sees, as was already mentioned, as direct heirs of the unenlightened despotism of imperial Russia, of its violence and brutality. Although Šestov labels them idealists, their ideal, as he explains, is crude force, physical violence (Šestov 1920b). It is interesting that their real life extremism corresponds to Šestov's philosophical extremism – a phenomenon which allowed Šestov's great nephew Igor' Balachovskij to draw a parallel between them[36], and which is responsible for the anticipations by the ideologues of the new regime that Šestov would be on their side: "those

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[33] Šestov's letter to Michail Geršenzon of 6.08.17. See Šestov 1992: 101.

[34] Piron 2010: 276.

[35] *Ibid*.

[36] See Balachovskij 1996: 68.

who perceived the October Revolution as the beginning of a worldwide spiritual coup did not doubt that Šestov was with them, that he was in the forefront of those who wrested the soil from under the feet of the old world"(Šteinberg 2000: 214)[37]. Yet, they had miscalculated – precisely because they did not realise the duality of Šestov's vision, the abyss within his Weltanschauung between physical and metaphysical.

Notably then, just as in 1905, the utter inability of culture, including literature and philosophy, to change anything in the horrors of reality in 1917-1919, causes Šestov's despair, and leads, arguably, to his life and thought coming together, in a clashing encounter. Indeed, in his claims in favour of the 'earthly' arrangements he betrays his rationalist side, typical for his behaviour, but not for his writings. He even talks of reason – as we saw above – from a different perspective, not exposing its vices, but lamenting mankind's loss of reason at the time of wars and revolutions. To understand this phenomenon better, we have to look at Šestov's reaction to the revolution of 1905, when, similarly, his two visions – ordinary and tragic – came together. This is best illustrated by his work on Dostoevskij – *The Gift of Prophecy*, written at the time (for the 25th anniversary of Dostoevskij's death).

5. *The Gift of Prophecy: Between Literature and Life*

It is interesting that, while himself clearly delineating between literature and reality, Šestov applied to the literary and philosophical giants of the past the demand of Romanticism – to write as you live, and to live as you write – to the extent of erasing any border between the two spheres. Thus, as Papernyj observed, Šestov's psychological analysis of various thinkers was based on his literature-centered approach in that he ascribed to Tolstoj, Dostoevskij, Luther, Nietzsche and others, remarkable cruelty, as if confusing the literary metaphor with real life.

> For Šestov, the main cruelty of Dostoevskij and Tolstoj is in their preaching, in the fact that Dostoevskij suffocates with his morality the innocent Raskol'nikov and publically defends a religious war, whereas Tolstoj for the sake of morality cruelly punishes Anna Karenina and generally judges people in a cruel fashion (Papernyj 2005).

However, Šestov's belief in the power of literature to change life was crushed, it seems, with the first Russian revolution of 1905. Looking at the interplay between Šestov's general supra-temporal philosophical approach and his more concrete vision as a witness and participant of the revolutionary events of the time helps to reveal the aforementioned 'duality' of his thought, which operates simultaneously at two levels. Viktor Erofeev labelled these two levels a day-time one and a night-time one, i.e. the level of the mundane and the level of tragedy (to borrow from the title of Berdiaev's article on Šestov *Tragedy and the Mundane*). He asserts that these two levels were constantly fighting and undermining each other. The

[37] Note that Šestov himself explained (as we saw above) Bolsheviks' sympathy towards him by his revolutionary role in philosophy.

mundane was linked with humanism and as such largely represented the human norm, that is to say largely the mediocre, whereas the night vision was tragic and full of forbidden discoveries that contradicted all accepted values (Erofeev 1975: 173-174). This duality is particularly evident from Šestov's article on Dostoevskij *The Gift of Prophecy*, written in the aftermath of the first Russian revolution of 1905, where this 'double-layerness' is laid bare. Indeed, in it Šestov openly regards Dostoevskij from the mundane, "day time" position, and thus criticises him for the reactionary nature of his political stance and predictions. On the other hand, Dostoevskij, despite all his mistakes, regarded as such from the ordinary "day-time" perspective, might have perceived through all this something "necessary and important", invisible to other mortals – as the night-time vision suggests. This "night-time" possibility counterbalances the due criticism that his political utopianism (labelled as such from the day-time position) deserves (Šestov 1977b).

The reason for Šestov's attacks at Dostoevskij's political "prophecy", at his opting for Russian Orthodox rhetoric as a shield from tragedy and a platform for a comfortable existence, might have been Šestov's genuine annoyance with the discrepancy between Dostoevskij's power as a writer and his utter powerlessness – to the extent of playing a pitiful reactionary role – as a public figure (or "prophet" in Šestov's terminology). Thus while Dostoevskij the writer served as Šestov's pastor to lead him through the tragic underground kingdom, he was no guide for him in the bloody jungle of Russian reality. Indeed, Šestov displays bitter, almost childish resentment that Dostoevskij's utopian visions of Russians showing Europeans a bloodless way to universal harmony remained utopian, and life, instead, humiliated these predictions by its retrogressive motion. The incompatibility of Dostoevskij's artistic and political predictions was the most hurtful thing to Šestov, perhaps especially so, because it painfully engaged his two sights (the "tragic" and the "ordinary") simultaneously and the resulting conflict could not be resolved. Instead, this only intensified Šestov's despair about literature's inability to stop the brutality and bloodshed of the Russian revolution. Yet, having blamed Dostoevskij for political myopia, Šestov himself proved to be a bad prophet once in Europe. Disgusted by Bolshevik Russia, he did not notice the danger beyond Bolshevism, and overlooked the evidence for the rise of fascism in Europe. Thus he wrote in 1927 in a letter to Evgeniia Gercyk (1975: 116) that the wounds of Europe are successfully healing, and "in five years or so one will probably forget even to think about war". Gercyk remarks how faulty these prophecies of Šestov actually were, because "in five years fascists were in power, and the war was imminent" (*Ibid.*). When Šestov did notice it, to the extent of dedicating to it an entire article (the one mentioned above), Nazism's advance was already in full swing.

By the same token, Šestov's criticism of Bolshevism in his pamphlet of 1920 with all its shrewdness still revealed some surprising *naiveté*. Thus, having penetratingly described the new regime as unenlightened despotism, derivative, reactionary and parasitic, which destroyed freedom and brought about destruction and nothing but destruction, he nevertheless clearly believed in the genuine benevolence and noble intentions of the Bolsheviks' leaders, most notably of Lenin (see Šestov 1920b: 37). This is to say that he did not realise

their overwhelming propensity for terror and deception (or, at any rate, that a revolution invariably unties the hands of villains, facilitating their rapid ascension to power). Of similar character is Šestov's admission of the possibility of the revolution spreading to the rest of the world (Šestov 1920b: 38).

At the same time, it is worth noting that Šestov's observations above, exposing Bolsheviks' belief in the supernatural power of a word, touch a vital chord of Russian cultural consciousness. Indeed, the latter is highly predicated on the role of language in national existence, and this, in some sense, explains the Bolsheviks' ultimate victory. As the academician Ivan Pavlov (cited in Ėpštejn 2005) with his theory of language as a second signalling system penetratingly stated, "The second signalling system of a Russian is developed to such a degree that objective reality is nothing for him. Word is everything". Furthermore, Michail Ėpštejn, who shares the view that Russian language "does not tell us about existence, but is itself existence", explains, "the Russian word [...] turns out to be formatively excessive and simultaneously informatively insufficient. It swirls around itself and carries an empty funnel of meaning", and, more to the point of Šestov's remarks about Bolshevism,

> word which subjugates semantics to pragmatics is incantation. [. . .] Ideology is a language of spells and curses, verbal magic which quite achieved its aim and transformed the outside world, or more precisely which turned it into a figment. [. . .] Soviet ideology used these features of language to full extent – to surround an object by a spell of words, to stick to it a nickname and to give it an illusion of existence through infinite repetition. [. . .] An even more drastic turn in the relationships between word and being is possible when these relationships just stop, and words turn into pure figments whose sole function is to mean nothing, but to sound in full, acoustically imitating an act of speech. The sound creates an illusion of safety since in it an existence of the other is manifested, while silence is perceived as concealment and hidden threat (Ėpštejn 2005).

Thus despite Šestov focussing in his pamphlet of 1920 almost entirely on political analysis without overt metaphysical flights, his philosophical intuition in the socio-political sphere is still highly evident. By the same token, Sergej Poljakov noticed a "striking resemblance" between Šestov's ideas about Russian as well as world history being created by the "grey masses", consisting of "the people of today" (often spiritually radicalized and not very cultured), and José Ortega y Gasset's work *The Revolt of the Masses*, written ten years later (see Poljakov 2000).

Šestov's appeal to the Biblical philosophy of history with an evocation of the Confusion of Babylon and acknowledgement of the inscrutable God's ways as the hidden drive of historical process suggest that despite the unusual for him direct involvement with contemporary politics, the essence of his work on Russian Bolshevism still stays within the framework of his broader concerns. His ideas expressed there, including his discussion of Bolsheviks' philosophical stance, echo those from his more abstract writings directed against idealism, dogmatic thinking and speculative philosophy more generally. As we pointed out above, Šestov's analysis of Bolshevism evolved with time, revealing ever more

sharply his aforementioned tendency to an existential and supra-temporal approach to history and culture which is deeper than the timely political analysis. His lines from the letter to Schloezer of 1938 summarize his stance well:

> Of course, one can't help feeling the horrors, not just those that are ahead of us, but also those which other people – strangers and those close to us – endured and continue to endure all around the globe – not just now, but in ancient times too. Do you remember the wailing of Jeremiah? And the thunders of the Apocalypse? But in an inexplicable way, both prophets and apostles discerned something else through the horrors of existence [...] as if they felt that the nightmare of 'reality' would evaporate in the same way as the nightmare of a dream. [...] Are all these Stalins, Mussolinis, and Hitlers eternal? And aren't their "victories" illusory? The more they triumph, the more clearly their nothingness becomes evident (from another perspective)[38].

6. *Conclusion*

It should now be clear that during the turbulent revolutionary years of 1917 and beyond, Šestov, in contrast to the popular opinion, did not stay away from history, but in his contemplations tended to a broader philosophical coordinate system. In his metaphysics, he remained the man of one, extreme and uncompromising, idea – of the fatal role of reason in human striving against necessity, and eventually viewed the Apocalypse of wars and revolutions that the world and, most of all, his native Russia were witnessing at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a direct result of the erroneous foundations of the human world (it is no accident that from early on he liked to repeat allegorically a quote from Shakespeare that "time went out of joint"). Thus he increasingly viewed the tragic history contemporary to him as the tip of a global iceberg of human predicament and wanted to trace the metaphysical roots of it, thus putting the contemporary and fleeting (such as politics, when he did engage with it) into the framework of the eternal and existential (such as history and religion). At that he made mistakes, and his shrewdness was mixed with his myopia. However, in what concerns the big picture, his cultural intuition was evident: while placing modernity in a broader historical and philosophical context, he penetratingly saw the reasons for political catastrophes in the crisis of faith, when, in his own words, the nightmare of faithlessness possessed mankind[39].

Thus, as the above analysis suggests, the Russian revolution deepened Šestov's tendency to delve into metaphysical spheres from the topical issues of the day – not as a way of escapism, but as a means of philosophical generalisation, which can prove unexpectedly useful in dealing with contemporary issues.

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[38] Šestov's letter to Boris de Schloezer of 11.09.38. Cited in: Baranova-Šestova 1983, II: 187-188.

[39] See Šestov's letter of 1938 to Sergej Bulgakov, cited in Bulgakov 1939: 319.

At the same time, during socio-political crises and upheavals, especially those affecting his native Russia, as was the case in 1905 and then, most profoundly, in 1917-1919, Šestov implicitly lamented the impotence of literature and philosophy to change reality, and thus allowed his common-sense 'day-time' vision (which was never extremist and reflected his rational and balanced semiotics of behaviour) to enter his writings, which were otherwise dominated by his 'night-time' position (thus displaying a revolutionary and irrationalist philosophy in what concerned the purely spiritual spheres). However, this did not resolve the existing 'duality' of his life and thought, and did not close the rift between his metaphysical contemplations and his attempts at political prophecies.

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Abstract

Olga Tabachnikova
Lev Šestov: 'Duality' in Life and Thought at the Time of the Rift of the Socio-cultural Paradigm

Russian-Jewish religious thinker Lev Šestov (1866-1938) is often regarded as a precursor of European existentialism. At the same time, his "philosophy of tragedy" is also assigned to Irrationalism, and Albert Camus characterised Šestov as a "new man of the Absurd". Since perestrojka, Šestov's writings, within the legacy of the Russian Silver Age more generally, have come back from obscurity, and their popularity continues to rise. This is due in particular to a prophetic, supertemporal character of Šestov's thought. However, with all the tragic nature of his philosophy, focused on the border-line situations between life and death (typical for the Silver Age as a whole), one cannot help noticing a border-line of a different kind, both in Šestov's life and thought. He was always torn between diverse, often incompatible spheres: his humanities studies on the one hand, and the need to be closely involved in his father's textile business, on the other; between his belonging to Russian culture, and his Jewish roots; between literary criticism, and philosophy per se. His very thought can be regarded as operating on two different levels (what Viktor Erofeev labelled as 'night-time' and 'day-time' sight of the philosopher). In the socio-political sphere, Šestov quickly realised the incompatibility of his aspirations as a philosopher and the Bolševiks' agenda, and emigrated. In 1920, at the dawn of his émigré life, he produced a prophetic anti-Soviet brochure *What is (Russian) Bolševism?*, and yet, later on in the 1930s, he displayed a certain myopia, not having recognised the rising threat of fascism in Europe. In this article, the above duality in Šestov's life and thought is analysed in the context of the socio-political and cultural rift of 1917. In particular, the author investigates in which way Šestov's perception of the era of revolutionary changes is predicated on this duality, and attempts to see if there is a reverse connection here. This is to say, the article endeavors to clarify the impact, if any, the shift in the socio-cultural paradigm had on Šestov's life and thought.

Keywords

Lev Šestov; Duality; Bolševik Revolution.