ANDREA OPPO,
Lev Shestov: The Philosophy and Works of a Tragic Thinker
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Having settled in France after leaving Russia in 1920, Shestov became one of the most important thinkers of Russian origin in terms of impact and readership. In comparison to other émigrés, he was probably rivalled by Berdiaev only, but in contrast to Berdiaev, Shestov was not an equally central figure of the Russian *émigré* community. Although he did publish in their venues, he was, as noted in the book under review here (p. 157), not particularly concerned with maintaining his lost homeland Russia in exile. To this reviewer, he seems to have more in common with thinkers such as Alexandre Koyré and Alexandre Kojève, who integrated into French academic life. Similarly, while belonging today to the canon of Russian religious philosophy, Shestov has nevertheless been considered some kind of 'lonely figure', and rightfully so, not least because it is debatable to what extent he was a "religious" thinker. Moreover, his ideas did not develop within the idealist paradigm that was so widely shared, from the Slavophiles via Solov'ev to the post-Solov'evian generation, to which Shestov otherwise belonged. 'Idealism', meaning a firm ground from which you can develop your reasoning and even system, was one of many targets of Shestov's writings. Shestov's thinking was, in his own words, an "apotheosis of groundlessness".

Andrea Oppo's new monograph on Lev Shestov is a remarkable achievement. The author has managed to write a clear, coherent and focused narrative of Shestov's development, readable and comprehensible to those who are interested in familiarizing themselves with this paradoxical figure. Meanwhile, the book is also heavily footnoted, for which Oppo reserves discussions about issues that are mainly for the specialists, which means that both groups will find this book rewarding. Oppo's book is a combination of philosophy, that is a discussion of philosophical claims and arguments, and intellectual history, that is the broader contexts in which they were put forward. The book is broadly researched – Oppo has not only studied Shestov's major works, but also his minor ones as well as texts and thinkers that make up Shestov's contexts.

When I characterize the book as 'coherent', I mean that Oppo has a keen eye for the main continuities and discontinuities, and in the following I will outline some of these for the readers of *Dostoevsky Studies*. The book is chronologically organized, its first part being "Shestov in Russia" and the second "Shestov

in France". It also contains three appendices: "Shestov and Husserl", "Shestov and Berdyaev" and "Shestov and Fondane". Oppo's approach takes into consideration the philosopher's biography, but this is first and foremost a reading of Shestov's oeuvre. It is a through engagement with Shestov's primary texts, and involve other commentaries when necessary.

The first part, "Shestov in Russia", focuses on the philosopher's main works of the period 1898-1905: on Shakespeare (and his 'critic' Brandes), Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, but Oppo also provides a separate chapter on Shestov's lesser known readings of literature, where he makes it clear that also Anton Chekhov had a profound significance for Shestov. Whereas Dostoevsky and Nietzsche exposed the "deceit of morals and philosophy", Shestov uses Chekhov to "unmask the deceit of art", portraying him as the "poet of hopelessness" (p. 87). Chekhov's characters experience the tragedy, but they do not die, they live on, rejecting and yet accepting their situation. They try to create a meaningful life "from nothing" but ultimately fails.

In Shestov's books on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, the focus is on the "transformation of convictions" (p. 28), that is when the two latter completely rejected their former, "idealist" beliefs in the experience of tragedy. In his reading of Tolstoy, Oppo shows, Shestov works with the opposition of "God" (standing for the absurd) and "religion" (human, rationalist sense-making of the absurd). The paradoxical conclusion of Shestov's interpretation of Tolstoy versus Nietzsche, which involves not only their texts but also psychology – Shestov used biography as a "psychological method" (p. 52) – is that Tolstoy was in a sense an atheist; Nietzsche a "believer". For Shestov, God is the "other" of reason (p. 38). On the other hand, Oppo also shows that the opposition between the two thinkers is not as clear-cut. As for Nietzsche, neither he was free form preaching, for instance in the doctrine about the superhuman (p. 38). What mattered most to Shestov in Nietzsche was his struggle against Enlightenment ideals. As Oppo explains, Shestov's Nietzsche was not the Nietzsche of the symbolists (p. 40), though Shestov, too, had a huge influence on the reception of Nietzsche in Russia. Tolstoy, meanwhile, was also not merely a preacher, although this may be the first impression when reading Shestov's description of him. In *The Death of Ivan Ilich*, Shestov finds a true exposition of the tragic.

Dostoevsky was one of Shestov's main heroes. Famously, Shestov appreciated "dark characters" such as the Underground Man, Raskolnikov and Ivan Karamazov, all of whom recognized the tragedy of life. To focus on these figures as Dostoevsky's main heroes was not uncommon in the early reception of Dostoevsky: Rozanov had already done something similar, and he discovered

in Ivan Karamazov a positive ethics, despite his "rebellion". Shestov, meanwhile, continues Nikolai Mikhailovsky appreciation of Dostoevsky's "cruelty". Like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky too could preach "idealism", be it in his "positive" characters (Myshkin, Alyosha) or in his political essays and journalism, where he left tragedy out of sight altogether. Dostoevsky's journalism was not the topic of Shestov's *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche* of 1903, but Shestov did turn to them later, and, not surprisingly, was quite critical of the preaching encountered there. But also in his 1903 book, there is, Oppo argues, "an authentic, 'cruel' Dostoevskii, and the Underground Man speaks on his behalf, and there is a less authentic writer who expresses himself in all his humanitarian novels and characters and in his 'prophetic speeches' and writings" (p. 48). One point in Shestov's Dostoevsky analysis that Oppo does not bring up, but which seems relevant in light of his subsequent discussion of the philosopher's later engagement with the Bible, is the role of the Gospel in Dostoevsky, which Shestov opposed to that of Tolstoy: It is not about ethics and morality but a promise of a new life (*zalog novoi zhizni*) that rejects science, as exemplified by miracles such as the irrational resurrection of Lazarus that Sonia reads for Raskolnikov.[1]

A remarkable feature of Shestov's texts, as Oppo discusses several times with great clarity, is that despite his rebellion against science, rationalism and even religion his style was in fact very clear and in a sense 'rational'. He did not write in the rhapsodic, paradoxical style of Nietzsche or Rozanov. Moreover, this was not only a question of 'style': Shestov is for Oppo a philosopher, despite his contempt for 'philosophy'. An exception is perhaps the work that followed *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche*, the 1905 *Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, which consists of a series of aphorisms, and where Shestov explained in the foreword that it was impossible to treat his subject otherwise (p. 61). And yet he returned to his quite rational style later on. What Shestov found necessary to treat 'aphoristically' was above all the notion of the tragic. In a sense, the notion of tragedy in Shestov seems straightforward and simple: it refers to the tragic events in your life that you cannot prevent, that in reality is the truth of life, and against which *reason* has nothing to offer. As Oppo shows, however, the philosophy of tragedy comprises more – it was Shestov's theory of knowledge. Shestov's idea of tragedy is "an active impossibility of logos set by logos itself" (p. 64). Drawing on Schelling and Nietzsche, Shestov saw tragedy not as grounded in an "error" (cf. Aristotle) but in necessity and yet as intolerable to reason. It is therefore characterized by contradiction or aporia, for which there is no ra-

1 See Лев Шестов, *Достоевский и Ницше (философия трагедии)* (Санкт-Петербург: Типография М.М. Стасюлевича, 1903), с. 125.

tional solution, only revolt. In Oppo's interpretation, "The only way to achieve this overturning and to really rebel against the tyranny of necessity is to *remain* in the contradiction – to live in the aporetic nature of truth and never detach oneself form it" (p. 67). As Oppo goes on to observe, this places Shestov alongside Nietzsche and Heidegger in the history of Western thought, but one of his merits was to bring in Russian thinkers and writers in this regard, most notably Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky was inscribed in his canon of those of "rebel against the logical, 'binding' power of reason" (p. 123), together with St Paul, Plotinus, Luther (cf. his *Sola fide*), Pascal, Kierkegaard and others.

In turn, this leads to a key question in Oppo's discussion: whether the anti-philosophical Shestov is nevertheless a philosopher. Rejecting the foundational principles of philosophy – necessity and noncontradiction – Shestov found his definitive place and his role as a philosopher opposing 'official' philosophy, not but nonetheless a philosopher", Oppo writes (p. 128). The thinkers of Shestov's canon, and this was also what Shestov tried to do himself, "used logos to question logos itself" (p. 133), which leads to the philosophy of tragedy for many of them. The recognition of the tragic was first and foremost characteristic of the modern thinkers he appreciated, but Oppo also shows that one of main heroes, Plotinus, accomplished a "revolt of philosophy against itself" (p. 151).

The preoccupation with the limits of reason represents the continuity of Shestov's thought, from his prerevolutionary to his *émigré* writings. But what were his shifts and developments? On significant change that Oppo reveals is that from "morality" (Tolstoy versus Dostoevsky and Nietzsche) to theory of knowledge and to *faith* as the alternative to knowledge. It is in this context that the Bible, that is the Jewish Bible (or Old Testament), became so important to him. Abraham and Job were faced with situations where reason had nothing to offer, they encountered the absurd, but nevertheless demonstrated "unconditioned faith" (p. 194). Their God was for Shestov firmly opposed to the God of Spinoza. The influence of Kierkegaard here is obvious, but Dostoevsky remained essential to Shestov in his later thought as well, as can be seen in *émigré* texts from 1922 ("Overcoming Self-Evidences") and 1937 ("On the 'Regeneration of Convictions' in Dostoevsky"). In the former Shestov plays Dostoevsky out against not Tolstoy but Aristotle and Husserl, in a "fight against self-evidences of science" (p. 138). Crucial in this respect is the "absurd logic" of the Underground Man (2+2=5). The 1937 article, Oppo notes, is very much in line with his 1903 book on Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, where "regeneration of convictions" played a key role. Now, however, Nietzsche is replaced by Pascal, whereby Dostoevsky rebellion is portrayed as a "fight against science" (p.

140). To the end of his life, Shestov claimed that the "essential" Dostoevsky is to be found in Ivan Karamazov and the Underground Man, not in his positive heroes. However, also Christ of the Grand Inquisitor story counts among Dostoevsky's representatives of the absurd, due to his rejection of the inquisitor's 'logic'.

And yet Shestov does not abandon the very concept of knowledge as such. He operates, Oppo maintains, with a distinction between a "theory of knowledge" (the "Western logos") and a "metaphysics of knowledge". And Shestov committed to the latter, looking for "an alternative domain of knowledge itself – a domain that may possibly include the 'principle of contradiction' and the lack of foundation (*bespochvennost'*)" (p. 160). In Oppo's apt characterization, Shestov's looks for the "exit door" from the paradigm of rationalism, which was nevertheless the "ultimate door of logos" (p. 162). By implication, as Oppo argues, Shestov's thought did evolve from despising metaphysics to acknowledging it, though always in opposition to rationalism and necessity. His metaphysics was the philosophy of tragedy, "which is, ultimately, a biblical religious philosophy" (p. 204). But not a religious philosophy, this reviewer would add, in an idealist sense. Reason, meanwhile, is not wrong, but it cannot claim to be absolute. Shestov was concerned with "the logical limit of reason", which is "a necessary limit because it is not placed on the same level as reason but instead placed before it, as it were" (p. 237).

This brings us finally to Shestov's well-known opposition between "Athens and Jerusalem" (reason versus faith), and one of the merits of Oppo's book is his detailed explanation that this is not a mere opposition; Shestov's "originality lies in the fact that Athens and Jerusalem do not stand on the same level, there is a discontinuous relationship between them: Athens is the truth in opposition to the truth behind it – Jerusalem" (p. 238). That both are true may illustrate also, I think, the very issue of contradiction, which was so crucial for Shestov and which is brilliantly explained by Andrea Oppo.

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