



From groundlessness—to freedom: The theme of ‘awakening’ in the thought of Lev Shestov

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Abstract

The philosopher Lev Shestov aimed to establish a new *free* way of thinking, which manifested itself as a struggle against the delusion that we have a rational grasp of the necessary truths on matters that are of the greatest importance to us, such as the questions of life and death. Philosophy, as the Russian philosopher understood it, is not pure thinking, but ‘some kind of inner doing, inner regeneration, or second birth’ (Shestov in *Lektsii po Istorii Grecheskoi Filosofii* [Lectures on the history of Greek philosophy], YMCA-PRESS, Moscow, 2001, p. 53). Having adopted the notion of the ‘regeneration of one’s convictions’ from Dostoevsky’s vocabulary in his earlier works, Shestov developed the idea of ‘awakening’ further in his mature thought, in which the motif of ‘awakening’ comprised one of the main ideas of his philosophy: the fight for the individual’s right to freedom and to creative transformation at a time when she is in despair or on the brink of death. In this article, I analyse Shestov’s idea of ‘awakening’ as one of the key tropes and developmental characteristics of his philosophical vision. In particular, I argue that, having stemmed from Shestov’s earlier interpretations of Dostoevsky, Shakespeare and Plotinus, in his later writings, the notion of ‘awakening’—the possibility of a fundamental, inner transformation of one’s worldview (*probuzhdenie, pererozhdenie*)—marked the beginning of a new salvific mode in his writing.

Keywords Lev Shestov · Fyodor Dostoevsky · Friedrich Nietzsche · Russian religious thought · Philosophy of tragedy · Awakening · Existentialism · Nineteenth and twentieth century European philosophy · Russian literature · Russian émigré literature

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Man is a mystery. It needs to be unravelled, and should you be unravelling it all your life, don't say that you have wasted time.
Fyodor Dostoevsky¹

Introduction

Often described as an existential writer, an existential humanist and a historian of philosophy, Russian émigré philosopher Lev Shestov (1866–1938) is recognised as one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. Originating in the Russian literary–philosophical tradition of the nineteenth century, the philosophy of Lev Shestov developed in close relationship to his reading of world philosophers, writers and theologians. Amongst other thinkers, Shestov's earlier studies of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche had been particularly important for shaping his philosophical worldview. At the end of the nineteenth century, Dostoevsky's popularity grew in Russia and Europe. Shestov emphasised that Dostoevsky's psychological realism challenged the notions of Western ideals (Shestov, 1903; Ogden, 2016, p. 12). For him, Dostoevsky was not only 'a free thinker and mighty artist' [Soloviev (1 February 1882) 1988, pp. 290–323], but a pioneer and inspirer of a radically renewed understanding of human nature. Coined by Shestov 'Nietzsche's predecessor',² in Dostoevsky's works, conscious and unconscious components were merged. As Nikolai Berdyaev wrote, 'Dostoevsky uncovered a volcanic crater in every being' (Berdyaev, 1934, p. 20). The radical critique of human knowledge presented in the rebellious and contradictory characters of Dostoevsky's novels provided a driving force for Shestov's tragic philosophy. This provocative approach to human existence, and the deep insight into the human psyche gained from the literary work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, had a profound impact on the formation of Shestov's convictions (Ogden, 2016, p. 3).

Having become known as an original thinker and fine stylist, Shestov took up the thoughts of Dostoevsky's underground man (the 'anti-hero' in *Notes from the Underground*, 1864) in articulating his bold assault on modern rationalism and scientific positivism. 'One of the first to recognize the new actuality of Plotinus's philosophy' (Groys, 2012, p. 34), Shestov's paradoxical position also stemmed from the tensions between individual aspirations and ethical imperatives in his reading of Shakespeare's tragedies (Fotiade, 2020, p. 466). In *Istoriia Russkoi Filosofii* [A History of Russian Philosophy] (1948–50), Vasilii V. Zenkovsky argued that Shestov's thought cannot be understood comprehensively without consideration of the Russian

¹ F. M. Dostoevsky, in a letter to his brother Mikhail, dated 16 August 1839, St. Petersburg. Quoted in (Kirpotin 1947, p. 5). My translation. All translations from Russian sources are my own unless otherwise noted.

² In *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903), Shestov wrote: 'Then, after Dostoevsky, came Nietzsche. He, too, had come from penal servitude—from the underworld, from the realm of tragedy, from which there is no return to the world of the commonplace. Listen to him—he will finish telling you what Dostoevsky did not have time to explain (or perhaps did not even know how to)' (Shestov 1969a, p. 317).

philosophical tradition (Zenkovsky, 1991, p. 82). Zenkovsky described Shestov’s way of thinking as ‘a believing consciousness, rare for its sustained and lucid quality’, suggesting that in Shestov’s writings the development of twentieth-century Russian religious thought reached its highest point (Zenkovsky, 1991, p. 91, p. 82). However, in hindsight, some contemporary scholars observed that it was Shestov’s rejection of Western philosophical positivism that had contributed to his somewhat isolated status among other Russian philosophers of the past century (Groys, 2012, p. 35; Zakydalsky, 1994, p. 153).³

On ‘regenerations of convictions’: Shestov’s philosophy of tragedy

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a historical sequence of events, which has become known as the Russian Revolution, brought on a spiritual crisis for Russian intellectuals. The period starting from the end of the nineteenth century and lasting throughout the Revolution was marked by a sense of impending catastrophe; the notion of Apocalypse surfaced in the works of such writers as Alexander Blok, Alexei Remizov, Andrei Belyi, Maxim Gorkii and Sergei Bulgakov (Kornblatt & Gustafson, 1996, p. 13). At the time, many of Shestov’s colleagues were under the influence of Marx’s theory-based method of analysing economic, political and historical events. As Berdyaev wrote, ‘for the Russian intelligentsia at the end of the 1890s, Marxism undoubtedly meant Europeanisation, access to Western trends and emergence onto a broader stage’ (Berdyaev, 2000, p. 17). By the end of the nineteenth century, Marxism, as a completely new formation, became the dominant philosophical theory of the Russian intelligentsia.⁴ Although initially sympathetic to the new intellectual trend, Shestov soon became disillusioned about the ideal of social–political utopia. He aspired to move away from theoretical arguments, when he opposed the creative freedom of the individual human [*chelovek*] to the representative power of dogmatisms (philosophic, scientific and moral) (Ogden, 2016, p. 3). Against the grain of the intellectual majority of his contemporaries, i.e., Western-European philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century, Shestov’s philosophical vision emerged in its determination to expand the area of philosophical investigation beyond existing and accepted norms. From his earliest publications in Kiev and St. Petersburg in the late 1890s, Shestov’s writing had been dominated by his concern with the tragic absurdity of human life. The philosopher observed that the tragedy of human existence does not conform to idealistic, positivist and

³ In the last 12 years, there has been a growing interest in Shestov’s philosophy, and a number of valuable studies of his thought have been published in Russian, English and French. For example, see three important monographs, *Léon Chestov, philosophe du déracinement—La genèse de l’oeuvre* [Lev Shestov, the philosopher of groundlessness. The genesis of the work] by Geneviève Piron (2010), *Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker* by Michael Finkenthal (2010), and *Lev Shestov: The Philosophy and Works of a Tragic Thinker* by Andrea Oppo (2020) and edited collections of scholarly works: Fotiade (2006), Shchedrina (2016) and Ermichev (2016).

⁴ J. M. Murry noted that, when Shestov was a young writer, ‘Karl Marx was enthroned and infallible’ (Murry in Shestov 1916, p. xv).

materialistic systems of thinking; resting on irreconcilable contradictions of life, it exceeds the calculated and predictable definitions of truths. According to him, ‘tragedies take place in the depth of human soul, where no eye can reach out to see’ (Shestov, 1898a, 1898b, p. 6). While the ‘omnitude’ reality may seem rational to some men, for a solitary man (such as a person in despair) the final, eternally unconquerable and inexorable reality incorporates unavoidable terrors (Shestov, 1982 p. 181). Consequently, Shestov saw the beginning of philosophy starting not with astonishment, not with inquisition, but with despair. Formed in his pre-revolutionary works, *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes* (1898), *The Good in The Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche: Philosophy and Preaching* (1900), *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903) and *Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (1905), an idea of a sudden creative transformation at a time of crisis or when facing a life-threatening situation and death became the core notion of Shestov’s philosophy of tragedy. Already in his first book, *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes* (1898), Shestov argued that the truths of classical and speculative philosophy set boundaries to human freedom. By contrast to the popular mid-nineteenth century Russian nihilist view that human suffering is a random, meaningless occurrence, not dependent on people’s behavior,⁵ Shestov rejected randomness [*sluchainost’*] and meaninglessness as fundamental characteristics of human life. Based on his analysis of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Richard III*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, Shestov raised the questions that would become central to his philosophy: the theme of human life as an absurd tragedy and the problem of human suffering. Thus, in his view, the essence of Hamlet’s tragedy lay in the Prince’s inability to give up the previously familiar world of fictional life and confront the reality—that is, the world of suffering and consciousness. He wrote:

Man is a creature without an internal compass. His needs (*Trichen*) and dreams (*Traimekien*) force him to wander. [...] Perhaps that is why there is so much sorrow on earth that man must wake up? Did the Ghost that appeared to Hamlet not come to wake him up? When we happen to have a nightmare while asleep, we wish to wake up in order to understand what caused it. When in our waking life we encounter a deep unhappiness, rather than try to understand the meaning and value of it, we ... crave to fall asleep. (Shestov, 1896, MS2100-1, p. 5, p. 7, p. 30)⁶

The comparison of life to sleep and the call to awakening from the life guided by reason,⁷ which would become one of the key tropes in his mature writing, could have emerged from Shestov’s early reading of Shakespeare.⁸ Importantly, in his first book, the thinker made a very significant observation, which would stimulate his

⁵ Regarding nihilism in Russian culture, please see Frede (2020).

⁶ The words in brackets, handwritten in Russian, are most likely Shestov’s transliterations of the German words *Trieben* and *Träumen*.

⁷ Shestov understood ‘reason’ in the vein of Kant, as an omnipotent rational authority which governs our thoughts.

⁸ The theme of sleep and sleeplessness also came up in Shestov’s discussions of *Macbeth*.

future philosophical enquiry: one ought to suffer in order to accomplish an inner development (Shestov, 1898a, 1898b, p. 15). In *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903), Shestov brought the ideas of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche into a comparative discussion, subjecting the thoughts of the two nineteenth-century thinkers to a critical and philosophical analysis. In the essay, Shestov highlighted the importance for a writer to have the ability to tell his personal life story through his literary work, the story of his ‘regeneration of convictions’ [*pererozhdenie svoikh ubezhdenii*] (Shestov, 1969a, p. 143).⁹ He specified that under ‘regeneration’ he meant rebirth of one’s convictions, that is, convictions born for a second time, but not necessarily of the same kind:

Convictions are born for a second time in a man, before his very eyes, at an age when he has enough experience and keenness of observation to follow consciously this great and profound mystery of his soul. (Shestov, 1969a, p. 143)

Explaining the motivation behind this type of analysis, Shestov noted that for him it is essential to acquaint himself with the biography of the author to follow the development of the writer’s ideas and ‘to learn how convictions “are born”’ (Shestov, 1969a, p. 303).

Drawing on Nietzsche’s critique of western ideals, in *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche* Shestov established the purpose of his philosophy as breaking the logical and idealistic continuity of argument. He proposed that, unlike scientific inquiry, philosophy should be derived from human life and that the most profound thought may arise only from despair (Shestov, 1920, p. 138). From Shestov’s point of view, Dostoevsky’s most important work is *Notes from the Underground* [*Zapiski iz Podpol’a*]. In his account, in this novel Dostoevsky revealed the story of his own life’s convictions and the painful renunciation of his past (Shestov, 1969a, p. 170). Significantly, *Notes from the Underground* was written at the time when Dostoevsky was going through ‘one of the most horrible crises, that only the human soul is capable of preparing for itself and bearing’ (Shestov, 1969a, p. 148). Shestov defined Dostoevsky’s state of mind at the time of his writing the novel as a ‘heart-rending cry of terror’ from a man who suddenly realised that all his life he had been wrongly convinced that the highest purpose in life is to serve the ‘humblest man’ (Shestov, 1969a, pp. 152–170). Shestov suggested that starting from *Notes from the Underground* Dostoevsky renounced his former ideals and took on a challenge to discover a new doctrine in his philosophical vision.¹⁰ Praising the writer for the ‘unprecedented boldness’ with

⁹ Shestov adopted this phrase from Dostoevsky’s vocabulary. In 1873, Dostoevsky wrote in his *Diary of a Writer*: ‘It would be very difficult for me to tell the story of the regeneration of my convictions’ (Dostoevsky 1894–95, IX, p. 342).

¹⁰ For many scholars, however, Shestov’s view that the underground man represents Dostoevsky’s alter ego and his voice is Dostoevsky’s own has fallen out of critical favour. Thus, in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), Bakhtin named Shestov amongst Dostoevsky’s commentators who had taken ‘the path of philosophical monologization’ in ‘their attempt to squeeze the artist’s demonstrated plurality of consciousness into the systemically monologic framework of a single worldview’ (Bakhtin [1963] 2019, p. 9). Most negative opinions about Shestov’s reading of Dostoevsky nevertheless boil down to an assertion that in Shestov’s interpretations the author is more present than the subject of his analysis.

which ‘Dostoevsky let himself deride the dearest and most sacred human feelings’, Shestov noted that ‘the truth of the underground is of entirely different breed than its magnanimous predecessors’ (Shestov, 1969a, pp. 170, 205).

According to him, ‘the men of tragedy’ Dostoevsky and Nietzsche confronted the chaos of contradicting reality by renouncing the prejudices of scientific positivism and the dogma of ‘humanity’. Like Dostoevsky, Nietzsche had come from the underworld into the tragic reality, from which there is no return to the world of the commonplace (Shestov, 1898a, 1898b, MS 2101–1, p. 10). For Nietzsche, a ‘revaluation of all values’ became ‘the formula for an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity’ (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 326). Thus, in the context of Shestov’s reading, Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God signalled the demise of the idol of the Moral Law (Fotiade, 2020, p. 468). Based on his comparative reading of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Shestov later developed the theme of an inner regeneration of one’s convictions and obtaining a new, reformed worldview in furtherance of his idea of a renewal of man, and a crossing from one world into another, unknown reality. Central to his philosophy of tragedy, the theme of an inner fundamental transformation of one’s convictions, which could open an opportunity of a new life ‘without ideals and pre-arranged purposes, without foresight’ (Shestov, 1920, p. 211), became salient to Shestov’s mature thought.

In his next book, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (1905),¹¹ which was published in St. Petersburg soon after *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche*, Shestov posed major questions about religion and faith that he will continue to explore for the rest of his life. In this book, the philosopher revealed the fundamental quest of his philosophy: the possibility of the revelation of a divine being through the tragic experience of ‘groundlessness’, deformity and faith. In his account, our constant moral struggle, including our endless rational inquiry, will sooner or later bring us to emancipation not only from moral valuations, but also from the ideal of freedom in relation to truth and the good, which cannot be realised on earth. Taking up Nietzsche’s struggle against rationalism, in opposition to the rationale of Kant and Hegel, Shestov argued that philosophy has nothing in common with science, for science relies on logic and therefore ‘cannot know what truth is’ (Shestov, 1920, p. 228). Highlighting groundlessness and uncertainty as primary conditions for the start of a radically new, ‘adogmatic’ experience of life, Shestov maintained that human experience is wider than scientific experiment, and therefore individual phenomena mean much more to us than the constantly recurrent (Shestov, 1920, p. 228). In the book, which was received with heavy opprobrium, Shestov took his reader on a challenging journey through a multi-layered texture of provocative thoughts in an attempt to uncover the groundlessness of logic, reason and common sense in the established rationalistic tradition.

Between 1919 and 1920, Shestov composed a parable about the Angel of Death, which appeared in the article ‘The Conquest of the Self-Evident’ [*Preodolenie Samoochevidnosti*], written on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of

¹¹ The title of the book was later translated in English as *All Things Are Possible* (1920).

Dostoevsky’s birth (1921).¹² In the article, Shestov told a story about Dostoevsky’s receiving ‘the mysterious gift’ of ‘a new pair of eyes’ from the Angel of Death, drawing on the writer’s life experience. Shestov’s attention was drawn to Dostoevsky’s close encounter with death in 1849, when the writer was convicted of political crimes against the Russian state and sentenced to death by firing squad.¹³ The effects of the traumatic experience of awaiting execution and the years of penal servitude in the company of murderers and thieves that followed turned out to be ‘life-changing’ for Dostoevsky (Shestov, 1969a, p. 156). However, according to Shestov, it was not the imprisonment and near-death encounter that shook Dostoevsky, but rather the experience of a discovery of a new truth, which led to a fundamental ‘regeneration of his convictions’ (Shestov, 1969a, p. 157). In the article, Shestov formulated his concept of the interchangeable discourse of life and death. According to him, time (as it appears to the empirical consciousness) creates the possibility of changes and great transformations (Shestov, 1968a, p. 329). How can a man know with certainty what is life and what is death?—he asked. In the way no one can be sure whether life is not death, and death not life, no supreme prerogative ought to fix the limit between reality and dreams. According to Shestov’s analysis, a newly discovered truth of the ‘second vision’, gifted by the Angel of Death, empowered Dostoevsky to embrace the hopelessness, uncertainty and despair in the finite reality of his life. Due to its metaphorical depth, the parable of the Angel of Death conveyed Shestov’s idea of a spiritual inner transformation, which could open an opportunity to begin living a ‘groundless’ life of endless possibilities. Whereas the horror of death is present in all living beings, the horror of the sensation of groundlessness brings man back to himself, says Shestov (Shestov, 1920, p. 75, p. 31). Struck by an intrinsic connection between anxiety and death, Shestov suggested that, to awaken from life controlled by reason, we must turn our attention to death. Death brings the singular existence of the human individual into focus, and it could open a path to another, unknown dimension, which is found beyond one’s rational comprehension, that is, beyond our thoughts and words. However, to be able to embrace this liberating experience, we must free our mind of its pre-conceived bonds and thereby renounce all certainty in our lives (Shestov, 1968a, p. 103).

Developing his worldview, Shestov adopted Plato’s definition of philosophy as the preparation for death and dying into his own philosophical vision (Plato, 2002, p. 8).¹⁴ The Russian thinker placed the problem of the unknown and the experience of death at the centre of his existential struggle. Philosophy, he asserted, is not pure thinking, but ‘some kind of inner doing, inner regeneration, or second birth’ (Shestov, 2001, p. 53). Correspondingly, Shestov suggested that, for philosophy, death might be ‘a great, although terrible liberator’, for its occurrence provokes us to

¹² The article was published in *Sovremennye Zapiski* [Contemporary Notes] (1921) and was later included in the collection of Shestov’s essays, *In Job’s Balances* (1929).

¹³ Dostoevsky’s execution was pardoned in exchange for 8 years (later shortened to 4) in a prison labour camp in Tobolsk, Western Siberia.

¹⁴ In *Potestas Clavium* (1923), Shestov wrote: ‘But Plato speaks to us of a deep mystery that only the initiates know. This mystery consists in the fact that philosophers have only one purpose, which is to prepare themselves for death and dying’ (Shestov 1968b [1923], p. 342).

see the mystery of life (Shestov June 1929, MS 2105–1, p. 15).¹⁵ Having emerged in his first book, *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*, the notion of death as the awakening from a life of dogmatic, rational slumber was developed into the theme of a sudden, fundamental inner transformation, which continued to preoccupy Shestov's thoughts.¹⁶

Shestov conceived of human life as having a mysterious meaning, and he suggested that 'each of us bears the weight of a terrible responsibility' (Shestov, 1968b, p. 53). The parable of the Angel of Death and the story of Dostoevsky's acquisition of 'new eyes' following a near death experience provided a metaphorical form for Shestov's even more daring proposition that 'behind death, the greatest of dangers, must lie the most promising things' (Shestov, 1920, p. 215). In his mature philosophy, Shestov raised his critical voice in defence of the existential actuality of human life and death. Death for him epitomised one of the greatest kinds of transformation. In his later writings, Shestov's calling to his readers to awaken from their millennial sleep of dogmatic, rational slumber and re-discover the original, primordial freedom was drawn on his conviction that only death can awaken humanity from its torpor (Shestov, 1968a, p. 114). Advancing his ideas, the thinker focussed on the questions of faith and philosophical revelation, which, in his opinion, are capable of initiating such sudden renewal processes that would stimulate a fundamental regeneration of one's ideals and beliefs. As we shall see further, the theme of an inner regeneration of one's convictions had also been predominant in the philosopher's thinking after his emigration. The advancement of this transformative idea took Shestov's investigation on the path to religious faith.

Revelations of death: Shestov's call to 'awakening'

After settling in Paris in 1921, Shestov intensified his quest into the mystery of life and death, expanding the area of his investigation across national, temporal and disciplinary boundaries. A motif of a powerful transformation when coming face to face with serious illness or imminent death continued to dominate his thinking, determining the direction of his philosophical investigation. In his mature philosophy, the notion of 'awakening' [*probuzhdenie, pererozhdenie*] marked the beginning of a new salvific mode in his writing.

Following his earlier assertion that *nothing on earth is impossible* (Shestov, 1920, p. 241), the concept of the revelation of death ('awakening') gained further philosophical significance in Shestov's book *Revelations of Death: Dostoevsky—Tolstoy* (1923), one of his first publications in France. In the book, the philosopher advanced his idea of death as awakening from 'life as sleep' with reference to Plato,

¹⁵ These observations could also be related to Shestov's personal life experience, when in 1895 at the age of 29 he suffered a nervous breakdown and subsequently experienced a transformation of some kind. The philosopher kept the details of this event secret throughout his life.

¹⁶ For further details of Lev Shestov's and Benjamin Fondane's understanding of 'awakening', see Fotiade (2001), pp. 30–42.

Euripides, Plotinus and Schopenhauer. Several years after arriving in Paris, Shestov began writing an essay on Plotinus, which was published in the Russian journal *Versty* [Versts] and later included in his volume, *In Job’s Balances* (1929) (Finkenthal, 2010, p. viii).¹⁷ In his discussions of the ‘awakening’, Shestov drew on Plotinus’s insistence on the need of awakening of the Soul in *The Enneads* (Plotinus, 1964, p. 78, p. 87, p. 110). Tracing this theme back to Plotinus’s philosophy, Shestov asserted that the moment of ‘awakening’ of the soul to the ‘deeper kind of conscious being’ combines horror and awe at the same time. Taking inspiration in Plotinus’s writing (with reference to Shakespeare),¹⁸ Shestov adopted a view that human souls could be in a state of sleep until a ‘violent struggle’ awakens them (Plotinus, 1964, p. 86). He wrote: ‘Plotinus’s assertion that the soul, in so far as it is in the body, rests in deep sleep, now acquires a new meaning for us—we must awake out of something, overcome some self-evident truths’ (Shestov, 1968a, p. 461). Inevitably, Shestov argued, all of us are ‘sleep-walkers’ in life until some inexplicable or life-threatening experience, which can activate our thinking about death, awakens us from that sleep. In his earlier article, ‘Anton Tchekhov (Creation from The Void)’ (1916), Shestov described the process of awakening:

Man has entered that stage of his existence wherein the cheerful and foreseeing mind refuses its service. It is impossible for him to present to himself a clear and distinct notion of what is going on. Everything takes on a tinge of fantastical absurdity. (Shestov, 1916, p. 54)

The awakening to the true roots and sources of life in pursuit of the possibility of making human helplessness bearable marked a paradoxical advance of Shestov’s thought beyond rational knowledge. Conversely to Socrates, he argued that death is not a *kind* of sleep, not even a final sleep without waking and ‘dream-faces’, but the antithesis of sleep (Shestov, 1968a, p. 226). Shestov suggested that life, not death, could be a sleep for those who have become enchanted by the ‘self-assurance’ of ‘eternal reason’ (Shestov, 1968a, pp. 226–228). He emphasised that, to awaken from the life of sleep to the life of tragedy, the ancients turned their attention to death:

The ancients, to awake from life, turned to death. The moderns flee from death in order not to awake, and take pains not even to think of it. Which are the more ‘practical’? Those who compare earthly life to sleep and wait for the miracle of the awakening, or those who see in death a sleep without dream-faces, the perfect sleep, and while away their time with ‘reasonable’ and ‘natural’ explanations? That is the basic question of philosophy, and he who evades it evades philosophy itself. (Shestov, 1968a, p. 229)

¹⁷ *Versty* [Versts], edited by D.P. Svyatopolk-Mirsky, P.P. Suchinskii and S.Y. Efron, and with close participation of Alexei Remizov, Marina Tsvetaeva and Lev Shestov, was a non-political journal, published in Paris in Russian three times yearly between 1926 and 1928.

¹⁸ As I suggested previously, the notion of awakening could have originated in Shestov’s early reading of Shakespeare.

In Shestov's view, one must make an enormous effort—and wake up in order to return back to reality (Shestov, 1968a, p. 289). For him, as for Plato and Plotinus, thoughts about death are accompanied 'by a special feeling, something like being conscious—that ahead are horrors, but behind, in the back, you have wings growing' (Shestov 1917–1921, MS 2113).¹⁹ He wrote that 'It is acceptable to think of the irrational as an exception of the general rule, in consideration of which everything in the world is rational. But it is not really correct to think this way. Everything in the world is irrational, mysterious, and incomprehensible to the extreme' (Shestov June 1929, MS 2105–1, p. 4a).²⁰ Shestov argued that we cannot see through the impenetrable veil of the mystery of the individual being unless we discover an 'unfathomable creative force' that could open a path to a new reformed vision, thereby expanding our mind into *another* dimension. In this unknown, '*second dimension of thought*', the Russian philosopher saw the possibility of rebirth and the beginning of a new life—in freedom.

The motif of 'regeneration of one's convictions', or receiving the 'new vision' from the Angel of Death and obtaining a new, *revealed* truth permeated Shestov's reading of other thinkers, including Nietzsche, Plato, Luther, Tolstoy and Kierkegaard. The mysterious nature of Dostoevsky's creative writing that had captured Shestov's imagination continued to stimulate the development of his philosophical vision. In 1937, he read a series of lectures *On the 'Regeneration of Convictions' in Dostoevsky* over Radio-Paris (published the same year, 1937, in the Russian journal *Russkie Zapiski* [Russian Notes]). In contrast to his earlier statements, he argued that Dostoevsky carried the convictions of his youth unchanged to the end of his life and suggested that throughout all his life Dostoevsky remained faithful to the ideas which animated his first works (Shestov, 1982, p. 149). Over 30 years after he wrote his essay on Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, in the lecture, Shestov proposed that, despite all the traumatic experience of Dostoevsky's life, the writer never gave up his commitment to 'the humblest man'. Precisely, according to Shestov, it was Dostoevsky's morality and his belief in 'humanity' that gave the fullest scope to the underground idea (Shestov, 1969a, p. 265). However, in his struggle against the dogmas of morality, Dostoevsky offered arguments that he could not have dreamt of before his experience at penal servitude. 'All the years he [Dostoevsky] spent in Siberia during which he read only one book—Holy Scripture—were not wasted', noted Shestov (Shestov, 1969b, p. 302). In his view, Dostoevsky's 'descent into the underground' helped him to rediscover his faith in God. The writer, like his character Mitya Karamazov, questioned himself throughout his whole life about God—yet never lost his hope in salvation: 'How will I be underground without God? For a convict it is impossible to do without God' (Shestov, 1982, p. 158).²¹ There, he wrote, 'In the galleys and the underworld, had been born within him [Dostoevsky] a great hunger for God which lived long; there he fought a great fight, the fight of

¹⁹ From Shestov's letter to his daughters, dated: 14.01.1921, Geneva.

²⁰ For Shestov, 'irrational', as a fundamental characteristic of human existence, is an infinite source of life.

²¹ Quoted are the words of Dmitri Karamazov from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

life against death’ (Shestov, 1916, p. 75). For Shestov, Dostoevsky was first of all a man of hope, and ‘his way of understanding of the world, his philosophy, was also a philosophy of hope’. That is why the faith in ‘humanity’ that Dostoevsky had taken with him to the penal colony the writer brought back with him unbroken (Shestov, 1982, pp. 163–164).

In his mature writings, Shestov engaged the existential problems of facing uncertainty, the unknown and death with the possibility of discovering a revitalised creative power that could enable the human mind to see the ‘ultimate truth’. The philosopher proposed that ‘In eternity, in the boundlessness of time and space, our conscious, living entity undergoes immense changes and becomes quite different from what it was under the conditions of limited earthly being’ (Shestov, 1968a, p. 312). Human despair, he argued, is characterised as a colossal power, a power which potentially is able to transform our lives. As suggested by Shestov, exactly in the horrors of life one may be able to find a guarantee for the future, for ‘it is granted to man to have prescience of ultimate freedom’ (Shestov, 1969a, p. 310; Shestov, 1968a, p. 312). Although the philosopher still insisted that the goal for finding that ‘groundless’ truth requires us to free ourselves from all ‘commonplaceness’, from all pre-conceived judgments and ‘lofty’ ideals (Shestov, 1969a, p. 201). While death for Shestov is the greatest mystery and the greatest enigma, the mystery and the enigma of life are equally great (Shestov, 1968a, p. 28). The motif of ‘awakening’ now encapsulated one of the main ideas of his philosophy: the fight for the individual human’s right to freedom and to creative transformation at a time when she is in despair or on the brink of death. The calling for ‘awakening’ and spiritual transformation, which would transgress one’s existential struggle beyond the borders, defined by reason, became a core motif of Shestov’s mature philosophy. As David Gascoyne remarked, existential philosophy cannot be understood unless it is seen as a protest and a struggle for liberation (Gascoyne, 1980, p. 142). For Shestov, however, his rebellion against rationalism and scientific knowledge was only, as Camus noted, a preliminary step (Martin in Shestov, 2016, p. 26; Camus, 1955, pp. 29–38). It was a clearing of the way for a fervent affirmation in the mature phase of his life of the truth of the biblical message (Martin in Shestov, 2016, p. 26).

On the ‘second dimension of thought’. Shestov’s ‘irrational’ conception of freedom

The concept of awakening from the slumber of traditional philosophy as well as from that of traditional theology found its further implementation in Shestov’s later writings, in which he aimed to reverse the long-established alliance between speculative philosophy and biblical revelation (Fotiade, 2020, p. 470). Corresponding to his earlier definition of philosophy as a ‘kind of an inner doing, inner regeneration, or a second birth’, Shestov elaborated on the notion of the ‘second dimension of thought’, which, according to him, arises when all the fetters of rationality fall apart (Shestov, 2001, p. 53). The 18 years of his exile in France up to his death at the age of 72 in Paris, Shestov dedicated to an intense study of the unknown world of the ‘second dimension of thought’, which he acquired beyond the framework of

his rational comprehension. Already in his earlier writings, the philosopher asserted that one ‘either lives in continuous experience, or he frees himself from conclusions imposed by limited experience (Shestov, 1920, p. 179). ‘Groundlessness, for Shestov, is the basic, most enviable, and most incomprehensible privilege of the Divine’ (Shestov, 1968a, p. 311). According to him, ideas are only revealed to us at a time of great inner silence, whereas words prevent the human mind from getting closer to the ‘eternal mystery’ of life and death, which is not reducible to something complete and intelligible (Shestov, 2000, p. 52; Shestov, 1966, p. 77; Shestov, 1968a, p. 237). Building on his previous observations regarding the transformative capability of thought at a time of crisis, he proposed that the despair that seizes us when we are faced with the absurd reality leads us beyond good and evil—to an act of faith. The source of inspiration for Shestov’s mature philosophy came from the biblical message in the words of Apostle John (John xiv. 6): ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’. In Shestov’s reading, the biblical words ‘for God everything is possible’ actually mean ‘for God nothing is impossible’.²² The ‘second dimension of thought’, according to Shestov, begins ‘where thought leaves off, where words are swallowed up’ (Patterson, 1982, p. 55). In the ‘second dimension of thought’ words no longer have fixed meanings; everything here must be re-created, began all over again. Correspondingly, faith begins where all the possibility that human reason can provide comes to an end, at the time when our experience and intellectual reasoning testify that there cannot be any more hope left (Shestov, 1969b, p. 248). The newly discovered, revealed truth initiates the beginning of a new life in freedom: more precisely, ‘faith is that freedom which the Creator breathed into man along with life’ (Shestov, 1982, p. 258). Shestov’s ‘irrational’ conception of freedom corresponds to his understanding of faith as freedom ‘not in the sense of credit, or the trust that is rendered to elders, parents, and teachers, but the faith of revelation which places man above all impossibilities and inexorabilities’ (Shestov, 1982, p. 191). This conception of faith implies a connection between the powerlessness of reason (as scientific knowledge) and freedom, contrary to the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

In his last work, *Athens and Jerusalem* (1938), Shestov revisited the subjects of knowledge and freedom, opposing the truths of speculative philosophy to the truth of revelation. According to Shestov, only truth of revelation, created by God, can give man freedom, as this kind of truth does not accept the constraints of human wisdom and human knowledge. In his account, at the moment of awakening, ‘man breaks the fetters which paralyze his will’ (Shestov, 2016, p. 145). He quotes Étienne Gilson: ‘The divine law exercises no constraint on the will of man... It is established that freedom is an absolute absence of constraint, even in relation to the divine law’ (Shestov, 2016, pp. 248–249).²³ In the culminative assertion of his position, Shestov identified faith with freedom, which he understood as a gift of an unlimited divine

²² According to George Kline, Shestov actively used the phrase ‘for God everything is possible’ long before he read Kierkegaard (Kline 1975, p. 53).

²³ Shestov quotes Gilson from *L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale* [The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy], II (1932).

power granted to us by God. Shestov’s lifelong investigation brought him a conviction that freedom of faith in the living God of the Bible could be an alternative to the constraints of thought controlled by reason and rational knowledge.

Conclusion

Way ahead of his time Shestov practiced an integrated approach to culture, in which philosophy, literature, theology and biography are not separated. His complex worldview, which exemplified a unity of Russian religious and Western–European philosophical traditions, allowed him to build his arguments on a broad spectrum of philosophical and theological ideas. However, the themes oriented towards the human being and humanity that had always been specific to Russian philosophy remained relevant to Shestov’s thought. As Alexander Ermichev noted, Russian philosophy is primordially existential, and in his works in exile, Lev Shestov formed the most poignant question for Europe in the aftermath of the World War I—the question of human fate in the contemporary world (Ermichev, 2016, p. 5). In Shestov’s view, the tragic aspect of human life is not something held against us but, on the contrary, is a source of meaning and of value (Finkenthal, 2010, p. 26). In his fearless and persistent struggle for the unattainable possibility to uncover the meaning in the paradox of human existence, Shestov attempted to expand his thoughts into another dimension, which lies ‘beyond’ proofs. The shift of Shestov’s thought into the ‘second dimension’ manifested itself as a discovery of an unthinkable, ‘groundless’ possibility, which would free one’s mind from the limitations of speculative thinking.

Shestov’s seeking to redefine philosophy in terms of a fight against dogmatic slumber found expression in his allegorical story of the Angel of Death, in which the philosopher introduced a paradoxical reversal of the values of sleep and wakefulness (Fotiade, 2020, p. 476). Whether he was writing about Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare or Nietzsche, his thoughts were preoccupied with tragic experiences in the lives of his characters, derived from their biographies. Shestov’s method of analysis of the text aimed to get to the essence of matters by looking closely into the author’s biography. Described by Shestov as his ‘veritable master’,²⁴ the creative eloquence of Dostoevsky’s genius had a decisive impact on Shestov’s thought. In Dostoevsky, Shestov appreciated a writer whose fictional characters spoke of himself: *his* spiritual path, *his* faith and *his* struggles. In everything Dostoevsky wrote, Shestov claimed, he told us about the regenerations of his convictions (Shestov, 1982, p. 146). On the rare occasion of agreeing with Shestov, Berdyaev, who famously accused his friend of ‘Shestovising’ authors (i.e., of making all the writers he wrote about fit ‘into his own image’),²⁵ also suggested this: ‘All Dostoevsky’s heroes are

²⁴ According to Benjamin Fondane, in their conversation on 16 July 1935, Shestov referred to Dostoevsky as his ‘veritable master’, whereas his ‘second master’ was Edmund Husserl; see Fondane (1982).

²⁵ As documented by Benjamin Fondane, in their conversation on 4 October 1935 Shestov said: ‘He [Berdyaev] accuses me all the time of making all the writers I talk about into my own image; he says that neither Dostoevsky, nor Tolstoy, nor Kierkegaard ever said what I made them say’; see Fondane (1982).

really himself; they tread the path that he trod; the different aspects of his being, his difficulties, his restlessness, his bitter experience are all theirs' (Berdyayev, 1934, p. 21). By the same token, it would be fair to consider the identification of the author with his characters in Shestov's interpretation of Dostoevsky not as a 'mistake', but as a distinct feature of his methodology, which he developed based on his original reading of other authors, and Dostoevsky, in particular. For Dostoevsky—as it is for Shestov—'deliverance from suffering must involve more than material betterment, and freedom must have a decisive role in any truly productive response' (Pattison, 2020, p. 169). Specifically, the underground man continued to be Shestov's main thinking ally throughout his life (Kantor, 2016, p. 3). As George Pattison pointed out, 'Freedom is central to the underground man's denunciation of utilitarianism and rational egoism' (Pattison, 2020, p. 173). Furthermore, as Ksenia Vorozhikhina explained, 'the method that Shestov used for his analysis of the text—is his 'wandering through souls' of the thinkers who were close to his heart—those, who had experienced hopelessness, despair, madness, or even death,—and that experience provided the foundation to their "revaluation of values" and "regeneration of convictions"' (Vorozhikhina, 2015, p. 80). For Shestov, after all, the power of philosophy—as he understood it—was in the articulation of the personal experience of the author's life in his or her work.²⁶

As noted by other contemporary scholars, Shestov was a writer who often related the ideas of other thinkers as a contrast to his own philosophy (Horowitz, 2003, p. 166). For example, Boris Groys suggested that it was only by arguing against other authors that Shestov was able to articulate his own position as a philosopher so effectively (Groys, 2012, p. 35). With the focus on the motive of the fundamental 'regeneration of one's convictions', Shestov developed his mature philosophical worldview, in which the notion of awakening—the gift of the 'second sight' from the Angel of Death—took on a definitively active role in his discussions. In the course of his life-time searching to unravel the mystery of human life and death, the thinker's worldview, drawn on his 'wanderings' amongst the souls of the world

²⁶ It is important to mention that, in contemporary English-speaking scholarship, a number of works explored new approaches that would allow more nuanced readings of Dostoevsky to emerge (Pattison and Thompson 2001, p. 11). Since the 1963 republication of Mikhail Bakhtin's famous study on Dostoevsky, the influence of Bakhtin's polyphonic conception of Dostoevsky's novels has been felt in literary criticism. One of Dostoevsky's most committed and subtle readers (Williams, 2008, p. 213), Bakhtin argued that Dostoevsky's characters do not represent the author's voice, but rather the author in Dostoevsky is present *alongside* his characters (Bakhtin, [1963] 2019, p. 7). Thus, Bakhtin demonstrated that Dostoevsky's text is composed as a polyphonic concert of living voices, one of which could be that of the narrator. By contrast, in the monologic novel, according to Bakhtin, all voices are gathered together in a single consciousness and 'the author's intentions and evaluations must dominate over all the others and must form a compact and unambiguous whole' (Bakhtin, [1963] 2019, pp. 203–204). In Dostoevsky's world, which is dissimilar to a 'single monologic field of vision' and is 'profoundly *pluralistic*', 'narrative is argument and argument is narrative' [Bakhtin, (1963) 2019, pp. 21, 26; Williams 2008, p. 113]. As George Pattison observed, Bakhtin 'is primarily concerned with rescuing dialogue from subjugation by the monological voice of absolutizing worldviews' (Pattison 2001, p. 245). Whether or not Shestov's reading of Dostoevsky could be perceived as monological is beyond the framework of our discussion in this article. One may argue how far the alleged independence of Dostoevsky's characters from their author and, correspondingly, their objectivity, in Bakhtin's prospective could extend.

philosophers and writers, accomplished a transformative movement, which involved a shift in his interpretation of meaning: from the philosophy of tragedy—to the philosophy of the absurd, with roots in the faith of the biblical God. As I have tried to show, the transformation that took place in Shestov’s vision in return was reflected in the changes that occurred in his reading of Dostoevsky. In other words, ‘Shestov found ground in his own groundlessness’ (Rubin, 2010, p. 221).

In the past century, Shestov’s paradoxical ideas made a profound impression on many of his contemporaries, including the British writers David Gascoyne, G.K. Chesterton, J.M. Murry and D.H. Lawrence. However, the same question still stands in the twenty-first century: ‘Whence comes sin, whence come all the terrors of life?’ (Shestov, 1982, p. 227). Today, when the problems of freedom of thought and belief have become an actuality for contemporary European society, rediscovery of the heritage of Russian religious philosophers of the twentieth century remains pertinent.

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