

***LEV SHESTOV'S WORKS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF PERSONAL
METAPHYSICS***

by

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Summary

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I. Objectives

The most important purpose of this dissertation is to identify Shestov's special, but until now not acknowledged position in cultural history, and to present it by comparative analysis, in the most complex way possible. The dissertation does not aim at giving a content-based and comprehensive picture of Shestov's life-work: the concept is rather presented through a detailed analysis of a relatively small number of his works. Shestov's relation to other Russian religious philosophers of the beginning of the 20th century is highlighted by the example of comparing Shestov's and Frank's philosophy (see the chapter concerning Shestov and Frank), while other important considerations of this question are referred to in other parts of the dissertation. It is important to clarify Shestov's relation to Western-European philosophy with the help of an other example: that of Husserl's ideas, the example which is especially applicable due to the interesting, contradictory relation between them.

The central part of the dissertation is developed through the analyses related to the Russian novel of the second half of the 19th century. Shestov's new interpretations are interesting not only from the point of view of cultural history, but also as a new understanding of the novels themselves. The after-life of the meaning of the works, and that of the author's position behind them, is significant because it gives a possibility to explore them - in a more general context of cultural history - the changing appearance and the unchanged spiritual roots of humanism.

As the presentation of the author's position, manifested in the actual works, has to be closely relied on determining Shestov's place in cultural history, special attention is paid to the analysis of the works on the basis of Shestov's writings. In this procedure it is important to give a short presentation of certain phenomena and notions of cultural history; the explanation of these notions is necessary to reveal the most important cultural-historical relations, but the possibility of a detailed and full analysis of these would fall outside the scope of the present dissertation.

It is also important to give an overview of the literature related to Shestov's works with an emphasis on the attitudes and opinions that are close to the basic concepts I use in the dissertation, and those that can make a starting point of the approach applied here.

II. The Methods Applied

The dissertation is built upon the comparative analyses of certain works by Shestov, the selection of which was motivated by the ideas described above. I intended to give a description as precise as possible of Shestov's position, and not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the whole of his works.

The texts are not examined from a formal or stylistic aspect, rather in the spirit of a specific approach elaborated by Fejér Ádám and Szalma Natália, an approach which includes notions like active and contemplative methods of religious faith, prophetic attitude and position, etc. The expression 'personal metaphysics' used in the title of the dissertation signifies this particular concept, which is closely related to the method of 'ontic cultural history', that is, the understanding works of art as significant points in history, here taken as the history of Salvation. According to this concept, and on the basis of Heidegger's philosophy, a work of art is seen as the fulfilment and representation of truth; as evidence of personal and transcendental truth. This attitude is open to notions and concepts used in the literature related to Shestov, but they are always subordinated to the notion of transcendental truth as a starting point. This means, on the one hand, a significant degree of flexibility, and on the other hand, implies an unquestionable certainty: the assertion/enforcement of a personal and open world concept, equivalent to the order of existence (which corresponds to the personal and transcendental nature of truth, as the notions of openness and transcendence correspond to each-other in a certain sense).

This mode of thinking provides the background for the analyses: as the approach takes philosophical, literary (and other) works of art, and also the expression of religious thought as comparable to each-other, (Shestov himself thought about this in the same way, having analysed works of literature from a philosophical aspect, and Ricoeur, too, who thought it was possible to compare 'prophetic manifestations' to 'narrative manifestations'). I think this is a productive way of widening the borders of a dissertation about literary history by enlightening them from the point of view of philosophy, history of ideas, and that of cultural history.

In the analyses three different viewpoints had to be taken into consideration simultaneously: that of personal metaphysics forming the background for the analyses, Shestov's opinion about the particular works, and the meaning of the works

themselves, interpreted by Shestov. Then, with the help of the basic notions and the cultural-historical meaning, the meaning of the original work could be revealed.

III. Results and conclusions

1. If Shestov's writings are examined from the point of view of personal metaphysics, we can say that his ideas reflect the attitude of the 20th-century humanist. In the sphere of the open and impersonal concept of the world, characterising the 20th century, in - and against - the anti-spiritual attitude forgetting about or denying the meaningfulness of existence, he gives evidence of the personal nature of truth and of his own spiritual position. By doing so, he opposes the so called 'scientific', mathematical, basically impersonal (and, accordingly, disfiguring) concept of truth. This impersonal attitude takes its origins from a philosophy which builds itself from the parts, and absolutely trusting the methods of the intellect (and in this way being exposed to the risk of creating an impersonal system). As opposed to these positions, Shestov stands on the grounds of the biblical, that is, the proper personal and transcendental metaphysics, and demands that philosophy should enforce the personal experience of truth, and it should start out from the biblical prophets' and patriarchs' faith.
2. This demand by Shestov originates from his attitude starting out from the values of Jewish culture: he asserts the spirituality and prophetic mentality of the Old Testament. According to this, he demands and requires Christian culture to assert consistently, in its way of thinking, the personal experience of existence, and this seems reasonable because of the basic common roots of Jewish and Christian cultures. Christianity has to abandon the illusion claiming that human thinking, without a personal approach (and relying exclusively on the laws of the impersonal intellect) can necessarily be on the grounds of truth. On the other hand, Christian culture should question the discredited idea of asserting the impossibility of personal experience in any circumstances, all of which means that philosophical thinking has to trust its personal element and the human spiritual creation.
3. As for the relationship between Shestov and existentialist philosophy, we can state that Shestov has the closest relation to existentialism (compared to other

streams in philosophy), though he is far from belonging to that stream. The point of their cultural-historical relationship is Shestov's spiritual position itself, which is above the problems of existentialism, and also his ability to evaluate these problems from an outsider's position. Being a humanist with a prophetic attitude, he can give some external help to people who do want but are not able to experience truth completely and directly, but are open to this kind of experience. He can affirm that there is a way out of this spiritual condition so typical of the 20th century, and he can help common people to experience the wholeness of existence, and to get closer to the meaning of Godmanhood, that is, to experience and accomplish, in a productive way, man's createdness in God's image.

4. There are significant (sometimes extreme) differences in the interpretations of Shestov's writings in the literature related to him. I agree with those opinions which do not consider Shestov neither nihilist nor sceptic; Shestov himself thought he was neither of these. Obviously, his specific attitude revolting against speculative philosophy could give a rise to opinions of this kind, but those who understand him this way may not have looked thoroughly enough into the real nature of his revolt. I would like to refer to three different opinions here: Vladimir Ilyin emphasises the firm metaphysical foundations of Shestov's thinking, Szalma Natália shows how similar his prophetic attitude is to that of Job, while Motrosilova (who otherwise does not stand close to Shestov's way of thinking) acknowledges that speculative philosophy deserves its criticism by Shestov.
5. Having compared Shestov' and Husserl's philosophy, we can say that Husserl's 'strict science' is based on the illusion that reason is necessarily sanctified by truth, while Shestov's concept of truth as 'revelation' corresponds more to the order of existence, and successfully overcomes the danger of substantialism. It is important to pay attention to the fact that Husserl was not only a counterpoint to Shestov's philosophy, but their systems have a common point, too: both of them represent the requirement of absolute Truth. The difference between their attitudes is based on the following: Husserl affirms the active model of faith represented by western Christianity (which could rely, in a certain sense, on the power of reason, because it presupposed a real and obvious relationship between religious faith and activity), while Shestov,

following the spirit of Orthodox Christian and Jewish tradition, represents the contemplative model of faith. Shestov gives an unquestionable priority to faith, because he doesn't consider the active presence of religious faith standing behind as something necessarily given. Eventually, we can say that the acknowledgement of the leading role of religious faith and revelation (the personal experience of truth) can be the only way to prevent human intellect from falling and to keep reason on the right track.

6. Having compared Shestov and Frank, we can establish that they both represent the idea of Godmanhood, but it is Shestov who enforces it in a more consistent way. Frank shows the ideal of Godmanhood in a very powerful and convincing way, but he builds up his system with the method of objective sciences, and, because of this, assigns an important mediating role to the individual parts of the structure, and he secondarily objectifies the spiritual 'sphere'. Shestov, on the other hand, consistently calls Spinoza to account for the personal quality of spirit and God. Shestov does not speak about the idea of Godmanhood in the concrete sense of the word, but he still creates a spiritual basis for that. This is so because the personal quality of God and the spirit is the foundation for the proper idea of man. As opposed to the old concept of humanity understood as a link in the chain of nature's necessity, he affirms proper humanity, which cannot be deprived of the creative qualities of Godmanhood, and its spiritually dominant role in the universe.
7. In the interpretation of Dostoevsky's novels, Shestov attributes a central role to the figure of the 'underground man', who represents, according to Shestov, the revolting (but existentially open) man of the 20th century. This re-interpreted figure is significantly different from the real heroes of Dostoevsky's novels, because the reasons of their revolt are completely dissimilar. The figure presented by Shestov accepts responsibility for his revolt and sin, having a special spiritual motivation, while the real 'underground man' of Dostoevsky's novels is a spiritually disfigured person, accepting no responsibility for his condition, and this is the real concept Dostoevsky shows from his ontic point of view in his novels. Shestov, by the figure of the 'underground man', finds an expressive way to show that the active model of faith has lost its validity, and emphasises the importance of the contemplative model. The starting point of this idea is the presentation of ideologies as a way of thinking deprived of truth,

the criticism of thinking about man as a part of nature (forgetting about the personal-spiritual side of humanity), and the criticism of morality, and, at the same time, calling attention to the importance of accepting responsibility for sin. According to Shestov, the hero of Dostoevsky's short story, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* and Raskolnikov are important because of the way they experience their sin, which is the expression of a spiritually personal attitude to existence. Shestov presents Mishkin's figure with irony because of his attachment to the active model of religious faith, while Hippolite is interpreted as the representative of revolt with the demand of the contemplative model (which is a re-interpretation, exactly like that of the 'underground man'). As for Dostoevsky's Inquisitor, Shestov thinks that this figure is not so different from the impersonal world-concept of the 20th century; we get a similarly inhuman world accepting impersonal laws voluntarily. Zosima's mode of thinking is not really different from this, either: Shestov accuses him of the impersonality of his way of thinking. All these ideas imply re-interpretations in the spirit of Shestov's specific concepts, but we have to put the emphasis on acknowledging their positive meaning from the point of view of cultural history: the significance of asserting the contemplative model, and instead of requiring Shestov to be authentic from the viewpoint of literary history.

8. Shestov recognises the common roots of Tolstoy's works and his own way of thinking in the presence of Humanism; however, he re-interprets Tolstoy's novels according to his own ideas. Tolstoy's works give Shestov the opportunity to explore the necessity of a prophetic attitude with a different emphasis on the importance of Godmanhood, which is not the same as Tolstoy's apostolic approach, which trusts the validity of simply showing the ideal of Godmanhood. This attitude seems naive for Shestov, but it rather represents a diverse style and emphasis in the process of humanism than a different concept of it. In his first writing about Tolstoy, Shestov contrasts the aspects of 'philosophy' and 'preaching', where the 'philosophical' aspect signifies the correct and authentic understanding of Godmanhood, while 'preaching' points into the direction of morality. Writing about the moralistic approach of Tolstoy's late novels, Shestov presents the inauthentic nature of morality in a very complex way. Ignoring the spiritual point of view of truth as a living support and background for morality, people will give up their real

humanity and dignity. On the other hand, Tolstoy's moralist approach does not part with humanism completely: it rather intends to present an easier approach to the condition of Godmanhood, understandable and applicable for common people, for everyone. Shestov, in the 20th century, is right, when he thinks, in a paradoxical way, that the increase of spiritual requirements can be the only possibility for common people to experience of Godmanhood. Shestov, in his second writing about Tolstoy, focuses on Tolstoy's desperate moments resulting from facing death, and he re-interprets them: death is taken as another chance, given to everybody, for being open to existence, which means that Shestov presents an important moment of existentialist philosophy from his own point of view, which is outside existentialism.

9. Post-structuralist approach and Shestov's attitude have common roots in turning against traditional metaphysics: they both realise that the original personal contents become substantial if one relies on impersonal methods. This means that they disapprove of the fact that the personal point of view is pushed into the background. However, they come to different conclusions on the basis of this experience: while Shestov urges the personal attitude to be in the foreground and taken as the defining principle, post-structuralism clearly emphasises impersonal contents, freed from their substantial qualities. By doing so, it refuses to accept the impersonal attitude, but, in an indirect way, it may help to renew metaphysics and to improve its personal characteristics.

IV. Publications

A bűn (The Sin). In: A keresztény tanítás szellemi-kulturális értelme. Szeged 1998, 80-94.

Az igazság személyessége és a szubsztancialitás Sesztov és Husserl filozófiájában (The Personal Nature of Truth in Shestov and Husserl's Philosophy). In: Szegedi Bölcsészfüzetek, 1999-2000. Személyes metafizika és az igazság szabadsága. SzTE Kultúrtörténeti stúdiumok, Szeged, 2000. 75-84.

Accepted to publication:

Sesztov és Frank összevetése a személyes metafizika fényében (Comparison of Shestov and Frank in Terms of Personal Methaphisics). In: Szegedi Bölcsészfüzetek, 2003.

Lectures:

Lev Sesztov munkássága az ontikus kultúrtörténeti koncepció szemszögéből (Lev Shestov's Oeuvre from the Aspect of the Ontic History of Culture). A Magyar Tudomány Napja, PhD szeminárium, Budapest, 1999. november 8.

Lev Sesztov Dosztojevszkij képe (Lev Shestov's View on Dostoevsky). Tudományos konferencia, "Ortodox kereszténység és kultúra", Szeged, 2000. november 24.

Lev Sesztov és az egzisztencialista filozófia (Lev Shestov and the Existentialist Philosophy). Apáczai Napok, Nemzetközi Tudományos Konferencia, Győr, 2002. október 17-18-19.