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An uncanny dialogue: Lev Shestov's philosophy as the 'great art' of not seeing and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic investigations of the unconscious mind

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Abstract

Having become known as one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Lev Shestov (1866–1938) advanced his pioneering ideas in parallel to Freud's development of psychoanalysis. Originating in his earlier works, his views of philosophy as art and the corresponding idea of the possibility of a fundamental, inner and creative transformation of one's worldview found its further expression in his mature writings, in which his insight into the nature of other thinkers' creativity took on a definitively active role in his philosophy. With the focus on the notion of the transformative capability of thought in Shestov's writing and based on my archival research and translations, in this article, I explore the Kyiv-born philosopher's ideas in dialogue with Freud's psychoanalytical theory and in the context of the postmodern view of reality as a symbolical and multifaceted representation.

Keywords

continental philosophy, Dostoevskii and Nietzsche, existential philosophy, Lev Shestov, philosophy of tragedy, psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, the Angel of Death, transformation of thought

Often described as a paradoxical writer, the Kyiv-born philosopher Lev Shestov (1866–1938) has become known as an influential thinker of the twentieth century and one of the forerunners of the existential movement (along with Fyodor Dostoevskii, Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard). A contemporary of Sigmund Freud, Shestov's philosophical method of reading literary and philosophical texts (as 'pilgrimages through

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souls') and his anti-dogmatic analysis of the human psyche made a lasting impression on his contemporaries (Ogden, 2021b: 7).[1] Based on my research and new translations from the Lev Shestov Archives at The Sorbonne and other sources, including the Archives and Special Collections of the British Psychoanalytic Society at the Institute of Psychoanalysis and research materials for my book, *Lev Shestov's Angel of Death: Memory, Trauma and Rebirth* (2021b), in this article, I explore the notion of the creative transformation in the thought of Lev Shestov. My aim is not to produce a critique of Shestov's philosophy, but rather to bring some of the thinker's ideas out into the open, thereby stimulating an interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy, art and psychoanalysis. In particular, in this article, I shall explore some of Shestov's observations, based on his earlier reading of Dostoevskii and Nietzsche, chiefly focusing on the notion of the creative capability of thought, which, as I argue, had become central to his philosophical vision and to the view of philosophy as a type of art.

Lev Issakovich Shestov was born to a Jewish family in Kyiv (formerly in the Russian Empire, now in Ukraine) in 1866, and studied law and mathematics at the Kyiv and Moscow Universities. Following his first publications in Kyiv and St Petersburg in the late 1890s, Shestov quickly became known as an original thinker and fine stylist. He formed his philosophical vision based on his reading of Dostoevskii, Pushkin, Tolstoi, Lermontov, as well as major writers of the Western canon, such as Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Plato, Plotinus and William James. Shestov's first book, titled *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*, was published in St Petersburg in 1898. Unlike some of his contemporaries, whose philosophical views were influenced by the writings of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Shestov's intellectual development took a different direction, moving away from the eighteenth-century intellectual tradition, when the young writer read Nietzsche while on a trip abroad.[2]

From his earlier writings, Shestov's philosophical inquiry was motivated by his intention to find meaning in the tragic reality of human existence. In his account, every philosophical statement inevitably bears the character and personal ways of thinking of its author, hence for him, it is not the writers' logic, but their sincerity, which plays a fundamental part in the art of philosophy (Shestov, 1908: 191). A true philosophy for Shestov was based upon a view of the world which took into consideration the tragic reality of human existence, from the perspective of personal experience (Ogden, 2021b: 23). Starting from his pre-revolutionary works, Shestov instigated his idea of a sudden creative transformation at a time of crisis as the core motif of his philosophy (Ogden, 2021b: 19). Shestov (1982: 193) argued that the nerve of his philosophy is found within 'the stone wall of impossibilities', arising before a person in a state of despair. When confronted by the depth of human suffering, truths provided by rational knowledge lose their effective power. Despair, on the other hand, may have 'an immense, colossal power', and one can find guarantee of the future precisely in the horrors of life (Shestov, 1968b: 217–219, 2016: 236).

In his treatment of literary and philosophical works, Shestov was first of all interested in the personal experience of the author, the creator of the text. Focusing on biographical details in a writer's life, Shestov's philosophical analysis aimed to distinguish the voice of the author through the voices of his characters to decipher the undercurrents of the author's consciousness, and reveal his or her inner struggle. Tragedies, according to him, take

place 'in the depth of human soul, where no eye can reach out to see' (Shestov, 1898: 6).[3] Consequently, the conflicts and struggles of the unseen world of the minds of writers and thinkers' became the main subjects of Shestov's philosophical investigation.

Shestov's interpretations of Dostoevskii and Nietzsche. The parable of the Angel of Death

Among his reading of other thinkers, Shestov's earlier studies of Fyodor Dostoevskii and Friedrich Nietzsche had been particularly important for shaping his philosophical worldview. Coined by Shestov 'Nietzsche's predecessor' (1969: 317),[4] in Dostoevskii, Shestov found a like-minded thinker – an artist, who shared with his readers all that went on in his soul. In *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903), one of his earlier essays, Shestov brought the ideas of Dostoevskii and Nietzsche into a comparative discussion and subjected them to critical and philosophical analysis (Jijina-Ogden, 2016: 94). He focuses on Dostoevskii's close encounter with death at the age of 28 (Shestov, 1969: 170). In the spring of 1847, Dostoevskii began to attend the Friday meetings at the house of M. V. Butashevich-Petrashevskii (1821–1866) in St Petersburg. On 22 April 1849, the writer was arrested, jailed and eight months later sentenced to death by firing squad. The experience of waiting for the execution in St Petersburg's Fortress of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, arriving at the Semyonovskii Square to be shot, and being reprieved only moments before the guns were fired, had a lifelong impact on Dostoevskii's life and work (Ogden, 2021b: 52). The years of penal servitude that followed, spent in the company of murderers and thieves, and the brutality of life in the prison barracks left physical and psychological scars upon the writer that lasted more than a decade (Shestov, 1969: 103).

With the emphasis on this disturbing, traumatic event in Dostoevskii's biography, Shestov explored its consequences for the writer's work. Arguably, in his view, 'enlightened' by his experience, Dostoevskii was about to embark on the biggest struggle of his life. This challenge, Shestov noted, was a fundamental re-examination and re-consideration of the values Dostoevskii had cherished before his exile to Siberia. Shestov proposed that Dostoevskii had felt united with the prisoners at the penal colony (Shestov, 1969: 214–216, cited in Ogden, 2021b: 55). After his return from exile, murderers and thieves became the main characters in his novels (Shestov, 1969: 209, quoted in Ogden, 2016: 8). By Shestov's (1969: 205) account, Dostoevskii's mature work became a battle against idealism, against 'a rose-coloured reality' of his youth built on false hopes. As Shestov observed, Dostoevskii's life experience, and his newly acquired ability to embrace the utter absurdity of his existence led to a significant transformation of his worldview, which was expressed in all his subsequent work. In his post-exile novels, the writer took on a challenge to establish a new vision of reality.[5] In Shestov's view, after Dostoevskii's experience at the Siberian camp, came the writer's recognition that the key to the understanding of man lies deeper than consciousness, conscience, or wisdom – in the 'underground' of the unconscious, where he 'himself' exists and where freedom is his most precious possession (Zenkovskii, 1962: 135).

Despite no apparent stylistic resemblance between Dostoevskii's and Nietzsche's works, Shestov maintained that traces of the experiences of Dostoevskii's characters could be found in Nietzsche's thought (Shestov, 1969: 239). According to him, Nietzsche

came after Dostoevsky to complete his predecessor's telling (Shestov, 1969: 317). As I have argued elsewhere (Ogden, 2021b: 59), the motif of receiving the 'new vision' and obtaining a 'new truth', which was central to Shestov's reading of Dostoevskii, was also present in his reading of Nietzsche. Drawing on biographical facts in the German thinker's life, Shestov (1969: 303–304) noted that from the age of thirty-four Nietzsche suffered painful and loathsome attacks of an incurable disease. It was then the German philosopher faced the most difficult period of his life. According to Shestov's (1969: 265, 303–304) interpretation, when Nietzsche became sick, he started speaking from his experience of a 'sick and suffering man, about subjects that are important to him'. For the first time in his life, argued Shestov (1969: 268), Nietzsche learnt what it meant to be completely alone. It was no longer possible for the German thinker to live as before, even though he knew that the new path could promise nothing but 'danger, agonizing doubt, and perpetual loneliness' (Shestov, 1969: 249). That poignant moment when Nietzsche's consciousness is confronted by the impenetrable uncertainty of his life is the vital point in Shestov's analysis, as it is here that the philosopher's idea of an opportunity to creative transformation, arising at the moment of one's inner crisis, comes into focus.

Shestov praised Nietzsche for his bravery: upon leaving all theoretical arguments behind, the German thinker took his life experience to be the source of his philosophy. If before the illness Nietzsche 'preached goodness', 'invoked truth' and 'sang hymns to beauty', by contrast on this new path he encountered 'much struggle', 'wavering' and 'doubt' (Shestov, 1969: 272). Nietzsche's (1989: 218) thinking in the second phase of his writing career detested the boundaries of good and evil, and it prevailed 'voluntarily among ice and high mountains – seeking out everything strange and questionable in existence'. According to Shestov's (1969: 298) analysis, Nietzsche began his 'regeneration of convictions' when he started viewing reality as an absurd 'kingdom of whim, uncertainty, and an infinite number of completely new and untried possibilities'.[6] In the essay, Shestov concluded that Nietzsche, in a way similar to Dostoevskii, stepped onto a pristine path: the German thinker's newly discovered 'psychology', had led him to a new knowledge. The moment when one's former worldview fails to make sense, regresses to nothingness for Shestov, opens a possibility to fundamental 'regeneration of one's convictions' [*pererozhdenie svoikh ubezhdenii*], and, as I will explain further, to an act of a creative transformation.

The essay on Dostoevskii and Nietzsche had been highly appraised by Sergei Diaghilev, and it was first published in St Petersburg in 1903. The years 1914–1918 Shestov and his family spent in Russia, where the philosopher witnessed the 1917 Revolution, which was followed by a civil war. Jewish pogroms in Kyiv and the cataclysms of the Civil War in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution forced the philosopher and his family to leave their homeland for good (1919). In exile, eventually settling in Paris, Shestov lectured on Russian philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne University and wrote his most important works, In *Job's Balances* (1929), *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy* (1936) and *Athens and Jerusalem* (1938).

During this very difficult period of uncertainty in his life, Shestov composed a parable about the Angel of Death, which, as I argue, not only marked a significant moment in the advancement of Shestov's philosophical vision but also became a pivotal point for all his subsequent writing.[7] The parable appeared in the article titled 'The Conquest of the

Self-Evident' [*Preodolenie Samoochevidnostei*], which was published in Paris in 1921 on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Dostoevskii's birth (Fotiade, 2001: 13).[8] In the article, Shestov wrote,

> . . . the Angel of Death who descends towards man to separate his soul from his body is all covered with eyes. [. . .] It happens sometimes that the Angel of Death, when he comes for a soul, sees that he has come too soon, that the man's term of life is not yet expired; so he does not take the soul away, does not even show himself to it, but leaves the man one of the innumerable pairs of eyes with which his body is covered. And then the man sees strange and new things, more than other men see and more than he himself sees with his natural eyes; and he also sees, not as men see but as the inhabitants of other worlds see: that things do not exist 'necessarily', but 'freely', that they are and at the same time are not, that they appear [. . .] the new vision seems to be outside the law, ridiculous, fantastic, the product of a disordered imagination. [. . .] And then begins a struggle between two kinds of vision, a struggle of which the issue is as mysterious and uncertain as its origin (1968b: 58–59).

In this article, Shestov tells a story about Dostoevskii's receiving 'the mysterious gift' of 'a new pair of eyes' from the Angel of Death, drawing on the writer's life experience. Once again, the philosopher's attention is drawn to Dostoevskii's encounter with death in 1849.

According to Shestov's telling, the Angel of Death, the Angel with a Thousand Eyes visited Dostoevskii and left him a new set of eyes. Upon receiving the precious gift of the 'second vision' from the wings of the angel, Dostoevskii was able to see extraordinary things revealed to him. In Shestov's account, the acquisition of the 'new eyes' and the experience of despair when facing imminent death subsequently allowed Dostoevskii's thought to break through the pointlessness of the finite reality of his life. Blinded by his 'double vision', the writer 'lived through this unimaginably terrible passage from one world to another, not knowing whether it was hallucination or revelation, dream or reality' (Shestov, 1968b: 129). Dostoevskii's thought, suspended between reality and dream, 'hardly seemed to know whether it is death, or a second, miraculous birth', wrote Shestov (1968b: 73).

Shestov's relocation to Paris in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution not only initiated the beginning of a new page in his life, but also the commencement of a creatively mature period in his philosophical career. The notion of a powerful and sudden inner transformation that he expressed metaphorically in the parable of the Angel of Death became central to Shestov's existential worldview. As he suggested, time (as it appears to the empirical consciousness) creates the possibility of changes and great transformations (Shestov, 1968b: 329). The parable of the Angel of Death, which captured the imagination of Shestov's contemporaries, widened the field of philosophical investigation into the area of the unconscious (Ogden, 2021b: 209).[9]

Freud's early philosophical influences

It is important to note that since the end of the nineteenth-century Dostoevskii's popularity grew in Russia and Europe. The Russian writer's focus on the individual's consciousness and the irrational forces of the human mind established him as one of the seminal figures

in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought (Marks, 2004: 63). In the words of Steven G. Marks (2004: 71), at the same time, Europeans discovered Dostoevskii, they were probing the inner workings of the mind. It is well known that Freud's psychoanalytical theory stemmed from his early interest in philosophy, which he developed during his university years (Askay and Farquhar, 2006: 21, quoted in Ogden, 2021b: 162). From Freud's correspondence with Georg Brandes and Peter Gast, we learn that Freud was an avid reader of Dostoevskii (Middleton, 1996: 327, 261). Although the initial purpose of Freud's psychoanalytic theory was to understand the disorders of the human mind, it developed into a teaching of the individual's unconscious mental processes and truths about human nature. However, truth, as 'a correspondence with the real external world', remained the aim of Freud's (1964: 634) scientific work even when the practical value of that work was left aside. According to Freud, human `life is hard to bear', but we must `make human helplessness bearable' (Freud, 2008: 17, 20). Thus, in his essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud admitted that he was seeking to return to his 'original purpose', which was 'to understand something of the riddles of the world in which we live and perhaps even to contribute something to their solution'.[10] Profoundly influenced by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Freud (2015: 18) argued that psychoanalytic speculation takes as its point of departure the impression, derived from examining unconscious processes.

In his studies on Dostoevskii, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, Freud linked the creative act to psychoanalytical theory. He observed that the creative faculty draws on drives and fantasies buried in the unconscious, and that they may provide the clue to understanding the imaginative mind as well as individual works (Phillips, 1983: 1). A lover of literature and storytelling, Freud turned his case studies into narratives. Counted within continental philosophical tradition as one of the 'philosophers of suspicion' along with Nietzsche and Marx, Freud gave us tools to understand the mechanisms of the unconscious mind. As Otto Rank wrote, 'Freud himself is a myth creator in the grandest style, in Plato's sense a real philosopher' (Lieberman and Kramer, 2012: 278).

Although Shestov and Freud briefly corresponded, the two thinkers apparently never met. However, as Shestov's correspondence with Max Eitingon demonstrates,[11] Shestov and Freud knew of each other, and Freud read Shestov's work (Ogden, 2021b: 177–179). But, as Aaron Steinberg (1991, cited in Rubitel, 2016: 53) noted, the 'mutual inter-penetrability' of the ideas between the two thinkers was likely to have a disinterested, 'dis-synergic' character, in other words, there did not seem to be an impulse of mutual attraction between the two men. According to Fanya Lovtzkii, nonetheless, in his writings her brother Lev was preoccupied with his auto-analysis, and thereby, she argued, in his work he anticipated psychoanalysis (Lovtzkii, quoted in Steinberg, 1991: 244).[12]

Lev Shestov: The philosopher–artist and a pioneer of psychoanalysis

Similar to Freud, Shestov was convinced that consciousness alone cannot eliminate unhappiness from human existence. Describing human existence as a 'fantastical absurdity', and 'the miracle of miracles', the philosopher saw the goal of his philosophy as the liberation of the mind of man by taking it 'out on the shoreless sea of

imagination, the fantastic tides where everything is equally possible and impossible' (Shestov, 1920: 38). For Shestov, the acknowledgement of life's absurdity became an opportunity for a fearless venture into an unknown redemption that discovered an unseen and mysterious meaning of the 'created freedom'. He proposed (Shestov, 2016: 66) that the miraculous power of that 'monstrous absurdity' that we account in our lives can carry us beyond the limits of human comprehension and of the possibilities, which that comprehension admits. He took up the cause to fight for his 'created freedom' on behalf of the living individual, because for him, 'human tragedy, the terrors and sufferings of human life, the experience of hopelessness, were the source of philosophy' (Berdyaev in Shestov, 1982: 1).

The philosopher expressed his vision metaphorically and he urged the reader not to take his words too literally. He argued that the overpowering postulates of human reason can put one's mind into a lethargic state. Shestov (1982: 289), therefore, suggested that one must make an enormous effort – and wake up in order to return back to reality. To be awoken to life, he inferred, we must begin 'the painful work of Sisyphus' all over again. We should not waste time on finding metaphysical explanations, but should try to remain awake (Shestov, 1968a: 187). In his mature philosophical works, Shestov's insistence on the need for subjectivity and inwardness in the individual's search for truth became a characteristic feature of his philosophical inquiry. In his original attempt to confront the unendurable horrors of life, Shestov highlighted struggle as an essential component of human existence:

> The philosopher seeks what is difficult; he seeks struggle. His true element is problematic, the eternally problematic. He knows that Paradise has been lost and wishes to regain the lost Paradise. If it is impossible to regain it immediately or in a more or less near future, he is ready to wait for years, decades, to the end of life, and if it be necessary, to postpone the task to the time after death, even if he should for this reason have to live in an extreme tension at all moments and to feel perpetually only the pains of an unending childbirth (1968a: 271).

As the process of embracing an experience of not knowing (or not seeing), the philosophy of Shestov alluded 'the possibility of another dimension'; in similar fashion to psychoanalysis, it strove to find meaning in apparently meaningless experience (Rubitel, 2016: 47). Furthermore, in his mature writings, the unknowability of the divine became the basic fact in Shestov's viewing of reality.

In parallel to Freud, who studied human instincts to understand the unconscious, Shestov attempted to uncover the hidden Job's Balances of one's soul, which he perceived as a metaphorical mystery (Kurabtsev, 2012 [2006]). In the vein of Freud, Shestov (1916: 88) contrasted science with philosophy, putting the latter in the domain of the creative activities of man: 'I hope that sooner or later, philosophy will be thus defined, in contrast to science: philosophy is the teaching of truths which are binding on none'.[13] Accordingly, man must 'learn anew to be horrified, to weep, to curse, to lose and find again the last hope, in order to root out of one's soul that belief in the impersonal principles' (Shestov, 1982: 87). 'Psychology, ignoring the threats of morality, has led us to a new knowledge', he wrote, for it prompted us to conclude 'that the most generous human impulses spring from a root of egoism' (Shestov, 1920: 141–136). Whereas, Freud's

psychoanalysis offered treatment in situations where cure was theoretically possible, Shestov's (1982: 215) philosophy aspired to find a 'healing for the incurable' in the situations when 'all conceivable human certainty and probability bears witness to impossibility' (Khazan and Il'ina, 2014: 13). In his view, the experience of awakening, as 'the most brutal rupture' of every chord of being, is the gift of the Angel of Death (Fotiade, 2001: 54; Shestov, 1968b: 64, 54). The moment of 'awakening' of the soul to 'awareness of that life that is beyond' combines horror and awe at the same time (Plotinus, 1964: 78).

The notion of receiving 'the mysterious gift' from the Angel of Death engaged the existential problems of facing uncertainty, the unknown and the anxiety of life and death with the possibility of a creative transformation. Thus, according to Shestov, many philosophers and artists went through such a miraculous transformation:

> One might name many philosophers, poets, artists, preachers, who like these three [Descartes, Schelling and Nietzsche], suddenly saw the light, and considered their vision the beginning of a new life. It is even probable that all men who have been destined to display to the world something perfectly new and original have without exception experienced that miracle of sudden metamorphosis (1916: 174).

The ability to confront one's own natural vision, that is, the worldview, which is founded on human reason, with the supernatural, or 'the second vision', Shestov understood as the *divine gift* of the Angel of Death (Ogden, 2021b: 206–214).

The Angel of Death, the Angel with a Thousand Eyes, sometimes comes not to take us but to leave us with a new set of eyes, to thus transform the nature of our vision and our thinking (Patterson, 2022: 141–143).

For Shestov, as an artist and creative thinker, freedom is a divine creation of new, unlimited and infinite possibilities and it cannot be known; it is unknowable. Shestov's metaphorical tale of the Angel of Death conveyed an audacious idea that in the depth of despair when facing one's own mortality, the individual's thought can be transformed and liberated. Like Freud, Shestov was motivated by his intention to help the individual to endure life. As is the case with the psychoanalytic point of view, Shestov viewed human freedom as an achievement of personal development. But in his efforts to discover a new vision of life, Shestov took his philosophical investigation beyond the accepted science- and theory-based philosophical norms.[14] In his later writings, the thinker explored a possibility of discovering a divine revitalized creative power that could enable the human mind to see the 'ultimate truth' (Ogden, 2021a: 135). Human despair, he argued, is characterized as a colossal power, a power, which potentially is able to transform our lives.

On the 'new dimension of thought'

Moreover, according to Shestov (2016: 330), in his struggle for human freedom there was no end, and there could be no end. As for him what is most important lay beyond the limits of the comprehensible and the explicable. Possibly, the most consistent of all existential thinkers (Pattison, 1999: 191), Shestov referred to his philosophy as an art, and sought to restore the value of imagination for the process of thinking. Furthermore as one

of Shestov's contemporaries, the philosopher Georgy Fedotov (2016: 387) observed, reading 'between the lines' was the key tool in Shestov's art. Although concerned with the existential actuality of life and death, Shestov's words vividly demonstrate the unique intention of his thoughts to 'go even further' (Ogden, 2021b: 224). In the cumulative advancement of his philosophical vision, in his final book, *Athens and Jerusalem* (1938), Shestov (2016: 300) declared this: men need to 'learn the "great art" of not seeing'. In his persistent struggle for the unattainable possibility to find meaning in the paradox of human existence, Shestov attempted to expand his thoughts into another dimension, which lies 'beyond' proofs. As Otto Rank (1983: 40) noted, 'lived experience can only be understood as the expression of volitional creative impulse, and in this the two spheres of artistic production and actual experience meet and overlap'. The remaining years of his exile in France up to his death at the age of seventy-two in Paris, Shestov dedicated to an intense study of the unknown world of a new, the 'second dimension of thought', which he acquired beyond the framework of his rational comprehension. For Shestov – as it is for Dostoevskii – 'deliverance from suffering must involve more than material betterment, and freedom must have a decisive role in any truly productive response' (Pattison, 2020: 169). In the 'second dimension of thought', words no longer have fixed meanings; everything here must be re-created, begun all over again.

As I had previously suggested, in Shestov's mature writings the theme of the rebirth of life – the discovery of the liberating potential of one's own mortality – became central to his philosophical vision (Ogden, 2021b). As in the case with apophatic theology, the philosopher's mature thought aspired to surpass metaphysics and advanced towards a third non-predicative way – a new dimension of thought. Hence his paradoxical view of reality, inclusive of the 'unseen' dimension, was susceptible to infinite changes. In Shestov's anticipation of the forthcoming postmodern era of many-faceted, fluid and ever-changing reality, he saw philosophy to be an art of a spiritual redemption. Like in apophasis, Shestov's unattainable, revealed truth lies beyond a reasonably verbal form. Shestov's discovery of the 'second dimension of thought' put his ideas in the context of apophatic theology and the thoughts of postmodern Christian writers, such as Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo.

Conclusion

A deeply insightful and imaginative reader, Shestov's (1920: 38) philosophy-art originated in an 'enormous absurdity' of human existence. Following his earlier publications, in his allegorical story of the Angel of Death the philosopher introduced a paradoxical reversal of the values of sleep and wakefulness (Fotiade: 2020: 476). As he suggested, those who have received the gift of the 'second vision' from the Angel of Death, are awoken to reality by becoming conscious of their absurd existence. Given the metaphorical form of the parable, the interchangeable discourse of life and death as the greatest mysteries of human existence invoked an idea of a spiritual and creative transformation for Shestov.

Like Dostoevskii, Shestov rebelled against the scientific worldview, choosing instead to explore the irrational forces working within the unseen dimension of the human mind. In Shestov's (1968b: 103) view, following Dostoevskii's mock execution and subsequent

fundamental 'regeneration of convictions', the writer renounced all certainty in his life and opposed to it – as his supreme goal – uncertainty.

As we have discussed, both Freud and Shestov were seeking to obtain freedom for the individual, but their ways and methods of investigation were different. Freud's analytic method aimed to find logical explanations for the instinctual impulses of the human mind. The psychoanalytical tradition dealt with freedom in concrete, historical and scientific terms. Shestov's philosophy, by contrast, entered into a spiritual realm. While Freudian psychology opened up the meaningfulness of the unconscious and stressed the importance of symbolic language, in his worldview, the founder of psychoanalysis retained elements of nineteenth-century materialism (Leeming et al., 2010: 37). Unlike Freud's psychoanalysis, which aimed at attaining a deeper analytical understanding of the human psyche, grounded in reason and logical systematization, Shestov's philosophy aspired to find a cure to enable man to withstand the pressure of the tragic reality of human existence by breaking free from the constraints of rational thought. As Rowan Williams (2008: 46) wrote in his book on Dostoevskii, 'Faith and fiction are deeply related – not because faith is a variant of fiction in the trivial sense but because both are *gratuitous* linguistic practices standing over against a functional scheme of things'. A unique contribution to European philosophy, today Shestov's writings offer us an 'absolutely limitless source of spirituality' (Kuvakin, 1994: 132–137, quoted in Ogden, 2021b: 112). Way ahead of his time Shestov practised an integrated approach to culture, in which philosophy, literature, theology and biography are not separated. His complex worldview allowed him to build his arguments on a broad spectrum of philosophical and theological ideas (Ogden, 2021b). As noted by Vasilii Kurabtsev (2012 [2006]: 128–143), 'No other philosopher in the history of philosophy has been able to define so radically the total, unique and absolute Unknown of each thing, man, world, and God'. Thus, echoing Shestov, John Caputo (2007: 72) more recently asserted that 'In the postmodern situation, the very idea of a 'spiritual journey' seems to suggest that there is more than one, that each of us must find a way'. Art, as one of such ways, becomes a vehicle for the passions which religious faiths once inspired (Pattison, 1998: 3). In my account, if artists were indeed the interpreters of the 'unseen' life of the human mind, then the thought of Lev Shestov would be one of this life's most profound affirmations.

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Notes

1. Among others, Shestov's writings were appreciated by British writers, John Middleton Murry, David Gascoyne, G. K. Chesterton and D. H. Lawrence, the thinkers of the existential movement in France, notably Benjamin Fondane, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, George Bataille and Russian émigré writers, Nikolai Berdyaev, Nikolai Losskii, Ivan Bunin and Sergei Bulgakov.

2. According to Shestov's daughter Nathalie, Shestov first read Nietzsche in the year 1896 (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 27).
3. The translations from Russian sources are mine, except for Shestov's books that had already been translated into English.
4. 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) (1969 [1903]: 317).

5. However, since Mikhail Bakhtin named Shestov among Dostoevskii's commentators who had taken 'the path of philosophical monologization' (2019 [1963]: 9), Shestov's reading of Dostoevskii has fallen out of critics' favour.
6. In 1873, Dostoevskii wrote in his *Diary of a Writer*: 'It would be very difficult for me to tell the story of the regeneration of my convictions' (quoted in Shestov, 1969: 143). Shestov adopted this phrase from Dostoevskii's vocabulary; it became one of the key concepts in his analysis of Dostoevskii's and Nietzsche's writings.
7. For a detailed analysis of the parable of the Angel of Death, see Ogden (2021b).
8. The article 'The Conquest of the Self-Evident' was first published in Journal *Contemporary Notes*, Paris, no. 8–10 (1921).
9. Ivan Bunin (2001: 37) commented on the legend of the Angel of Death in his book *The Liberation of Tolstoi: A Tale of Two Writers*. The parable also caught the imagination of Boris de Shlöezer, who referred to it in his preface to the French edition of Shestov's *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1966) (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 38). Philosopher Nikolai Losskii (1939) quoted the parable of the Angel of Death in his article 'Lev Shestov kak filosof' [Lev Shestov as a philosopher].
10. In his younger years, Freud's 'original goal' was to pursue philosophy, and under the influence of Brentano, he decided to take his PhD in philosophy and sociology.
11. Max Efimowitsch Eitingon was born in Mogilev, a son of a wealthy Jewish fur trader from Russia. He grew up in Leipzig, where his family moved when he was 12. Between 1920 and 1933 Eitingons lived in Berlin, where he co-founded and led the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. In 1926 Eitingon became the president of the International Psychoanalytic Association.
12. Throughout his life, Shestov was in close contact with his sister Fanya Lovtzkii, a psychoanalyst, who became a student of Dr Max Eitingon (1881–1943), a psychoanalyst and a long-time assistant of Sigmund Freud. In 1922, Fanya introduced Shestov to Eitingon, with whom the philosopher maintained a warm friendship for the rest of his life (Rubitel, 2016: 53). Shestov and Eitingon frequently visited each other in Paris and Berlin. Eitingon valued Shestov's philosophy very highly and for many years he supported Shestov and his family.
13. Philosophy, according to Shestov (1920: 37–38), must have nothing in common with logic, because 'logical thinking kills imagination'.
14. Shestov's distinct awareness of the divine secrets of being could be rooted in his early reading of Talmudic narratives and other texts of Jewish mystics and writers of the Jewish tradition of *Aggadah.*

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