

# Russian, Stalinist and Soviet Re-Readings of Kierkegaard: Lev Shestov and Piama Gaidenko\*

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Basically my whole existence is the deepest irony. Irony is suspect both to the right and the left. That is why a true ironist never belongs to the majority. But the wag does.

Soren Kierkegaard, *The Diary*

**ABSTRACT:** This is a comparative analysis of the Russian re-readings of Soren Kierkegaard. The paper demonstrates a profound interdependence between the text and cultural context. Special attention is given to Lev Shestov's presentation of Kierkegaard as "Dostoevsky's Double" and Piama Gaidenko's modernist depiction of Kierkegaard as a "master of paradox and irony." The former was written in France at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the latter was realized during the "thaw" of the 1970s. This study of the Russian reception of Kierkegaard complements and links the existing European and North American interpretations of his philosophical system to the Russian intellectual tradition. The paper concludes that Gaidenko fruitfully joined the discourse on Being and Existence, even though she had no access to the mainstream postmodern debates, but she did so on the basis of Europe's shared cultural tradition.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the acclaimed "father of modern European existentialism" went largely unnoticed in Europe during his time and his proper place in the history of philosophy is still being defined. The present diachronic comparative analysis reveals the rather complex reception of the Danish philosopher in tsarist and Soviet Russia, disclosing some plausible reasons for his delayed recognition, pointing to his quite modernist argumentation and style, the unusual categories, while simultaneously capturing the interplay between history, politics and philosophy. In addition to the specific question of Kierkegaard's role in the history of European modern philosophy and existentialism, this article deals with the painful evolution of Russian nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophical thought as a result of the October revolution and Stalin's dictatorship. Lev Shestov's interpretations of Kierkegaard-made outside Russia-are a contrast to tsarist and Stalinist views. I place special emphasis on

the reading of Kierkegaard constructed by Piama Gaidenko who brings forth some new aspects of the Danish existentialist.

## **1. THE MYTH OF DISCOVERY AND KIERKEGAARD'S IMAGE IN RUSSIA**

The discovery of Kierkegaard in Russia follows the general pattern in Europe. Mentioned in the standard Russian tsarist reference sources, he was as unpopular in Russia as he was in Europe. Prior to 1917 it was due to the basic anti-- Hegelian premises of his philosophical system. All the mainstream Russian philosophers-democrats (Belinsky, Herzen and Chernyshevsky) were very much infatuated with Hegel and responsible for his cult during Kierkegaard's lifetime. Only in 1935 did Lev Shestov rediscover the Danish philosopher, therefore acquiring the reputation of being his Russian interpreter and presenter. Lev Shestov, who had emigrated from Russia in 1914 to France and Switzerland, later claimed to be the expert on Russian culture and its broker in the West. On May 5, 1935 Shestov presented to the French Academy of Religion and Philosophy his paper "Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky," which became part of his well-known book *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*. It was this book that earned him the reputation of a "Russian Columbus." It contained the following problematic statement:

Kierkegaard bypassed Russia. Not once did I so much as hear his name in philosophical or literary circles. I am ashamed to admit it, but it would be a sin to conceal the fact that just a few years ago I knew nothing about Kierkegaard. Even in France he is all but unknown.<sup>1</sup>

Was Shestov sincere or merely trying to promote his own discovery? He must have been aware at least of the 1902 edition of the *Bol'shaia russkaia entsiklopediia* (The Great Russian Encyclopedia), available even before his departure to the West. This edition provides a rather concise but informative description of Kierkegaard's role in the history of philosophy and acknowledges familiarity of Russian scholars with the Danish philosopher.

The contributor and the author of the entry, P.O. Kaptenev, describes him as a thinker whose methodology and orientation "is remarkably parallel to that of Ludwig Feuerbach."<sup>2</sup> Kaptenev maintained that, despite Feuerbach's and Kierkegaard's strong interest in Christianity, this interest took them in different ideological directions. In

Kaptenev's view, the essence of Feuerbach's search was to arrive at the gist of Christian doctrine, with the goal of rejecting it. Kierkegaard, in contrast, became totally consumed by Christianity. Kaptenev's brief portrait of Kierkegaard concluded:

All of Kierkegaard's works are marked by a sensitive, creative and witty dialectics and united by his passionate enthusiasm to protect Christianity as the Gospel of suffering. His language is noble everywhere, full of poetic exaltation and mesmerizing eloquence, albeit occasionally hard to comprehend. His works had a great impact on contemporaries and the entire process of development of Danish literature.<sup>3</sup>

The author also dutifully mentions Kierkegaard's main works, citing the Danish titles with Russian translations. This means that either Shestov was indeed unaware of the 1902 encyclopedia entry and the work of his Russian colleagues prior to 1914, or else he merely chose to build an image for himself in France as the "Russian discoverer of Kierkegaard." The French audiences believed him and this augmented his own popularity beyond Russia.

## **II. KIERKEGAARD, THE "EVIL OBSCURANTIST" IN STALIN'S TIMES**

The prerevolutionary portrait of Kierkegaard as just a marginal Christian thinker as well as the nineteenth-century cult of Hegel and Feuerbach in tsarist Russia also affected the postrevolutionary image of Kierkegaard in the Russian tradition. The specificity of Russian cultural history and politics determined its materialist or positivist trends in philosophy, justifying the omission or condemnation of Kierkegaard. The Russian revolutionary romantics and reformers of the nineteenth century had already created a paradigm for the future Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism, having thus excluded, even prior to the 1917, any discursive alternative. The "bypassing of Russia" by Kierkegaard was thus conditioned by the socio-political and historical course of Russia long before the October revolution.

However, if the prerevolutionary portrait of Kierkegaard was somewhat lyrical and sympathetic, albeit condescending, the postrevolutionary Stalinist characterization would become almost grotesque. Kierkegaard would no longer be a noble, naive idealist but the embodiment of Evil, a Dostoevskian devil. The editors of the fourth edition of *Kratkii filosofskii slovar'* (Short Philosophical Dictionary, 1954), M. Rosental' and P. Iudin

introduced existentialism to the Soviet reader as "a subjective-idealistic philosophical trend belonging to the epoch of imperialism," whose main goal, allegedly, was "to demoralize societal consciousness and struggle against the revolutionary proletarian institutions."<sup>4</sup> The Stalinist interpreters of existentialism acknowledged Kierkegaard as the founder of this presumably hostile ideology:

This reactionary philosophy [existentialism] is the creation of the Danish malicious obscurantist Kierkegaard, the enemy of socialism and democracy who considered even Schelling's philosophy of revolution insufficiently reactionary. By existence, he understands individual spiritual life and juxtaposes "existence" to being, i.e, the material world, the real physical and social life. A repulsive attitude toward life, fear of death, despair-these are the main themes of his works which rightfully belong to psychopathology rather than to philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

The style of this Stalinist source reflects the devastating ideological atmosphere that made any independent analytical commentary and philosophical debate impossible. Incidentally, Shestov himself was omitted from this rant for obvious reasons. The Stalin era largely contributed to stifling Kierkegaard studies during the Soviet period. Consequently, the readings of Kierkegaard were mostly limited to Lev Shestov, Bernard Bykhovskiy (a Stalin Prize winner), and Piama Gaidenko. Bykhovskiy, the author of the multi-volume Soviet history of philosophy (1940) may deserve some mention, but he can hardly be regarded as an authority on "the philosopher of faith" in an officially atheistic state that had proclaimed war on Faith itself. Thus, Lev Shestov and Piama Gaidenko-- separated by thirty-five years-- emerge as the exemplary classical readings of Kierkegaard through the prism of Kantian, Hegelian and Dostoevskian philosophies.

### **III. LEV SHESTOV AND DOSTOEVSKY: MAN-GOD AND GOD-MAN**

In his historic 1935 paper, Shestov attempted to present Kierkegaard to the world and to Russian readers through the prism of Dostoevsky, using his metaphor of the double:

... Dostoevsky is Kierkegaard's double. Not only their ideas but also their methods of inquiry into the truth are absolutely identical, and are equally unlike those which form the content of speculative philosophy, Kierkegaard went from Hegel to the private thinker Job. Dostoevsky did the same.<sup>6</sup>

Shestov tried to allude to the seemingly identical path in Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's quest for Truth, namely, the movement away from Hegel's rationality and his attitude toward pagan pre-Christian mythical consciousness. Shestov argued that, in the Hegelian system, "all that was real was rational" and, therefore, had to be accepted as the occasion for contemplation and speculation, an opportunity for knowledge and understanding. For him, Dostoevsky joins his "double," Kierkegaard, through his disturbing acceptance of the irrational and in his denial of knowing beyond. Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky are both rebels against the domination of Hegelian thought. All that he [Kierkegaard] found unacceptable in the doctrines of Hegel seemed just as unacceptable to Dostoevsky.<sup>7</sup> Hegel saw the true content of Christianity in philosophy, imagining the genesis of Faith in Reason and structured imagination. According to Shestov, Hegel "thoroughly despised Scripture" and accepted only those Biblical passages that could be justified by rational consciousness.<sup>8</sup> For the same reason, Aristotle was the greatest authority for Hegel—as he was for Dante who "had reason to call Aristotle 'il maestro di coloro, chi sanno' (the distinguished master of those who know)." Shestov, quite unexpectedly for himself, discovered some paradoxical affinity between Aristotle, Hegel and Dostoevsky. Attempting to separate Hegel and Dostoevsky, Hegel and Kierkegaard, he ironically used a famous quotation from Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion*: "the fundamental idea [of Christianity] is the unity of the divine and human natures: God has become man."<sup>9</sup> Shestov completely contradicts his own, previous statements about Hegel and the "Russian double of Kierkegaard" (Dostoevsky), since he forgets about similar statements made by Dostoevsky. In his novel *Be-su* (*The Possessed* or *The Devils*), Dostoevsky shockingly reverses the Hegelian dictum and his concept of God-Man:

He who succeeds in teaching men that they are all good will end the world. He who tried to teach that was crucified. He'll come and his name is man-god. God-man? No, man-god--that is a totally different [universe].<sup>10</sup>

Dostoevsky's new human being would allegedly be God-like in power and his knowledge would enable him to acquire new freedom, new happiness and wisdom, allowing him to restructure the existing system of knowledge. This image from *Besy* contradicts Dostoevsky's other statements, already known to Shestov.

According to Shestov, the entire corpus of Dostoevsky's works—*The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Possessed*, *The Notes from the Underground*, *The Dream of the Ridiculous Man* and others—were "but variations on the theme from the Book of Job, as [were] the works of Kierkegaard."<sup>11</sup> In Shestov's view, Dostoevsky and his Danish double both "withdrew from the general," both regarded Truth as a terrible illusion, allegedly believing that "all the horrors of existence have come into the world from the allness toward which our reason summons us."<sup>12</sup> Both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, claims Shestov, shy away from Reason and Knowledge, which failed to bring happiness and freedom to mankind. Swayed by Romantic desire and passion, and shifting away from Reason, Shestov states: "Knowledge has not brought man to freedom, as we are accustomed to think and as speculative philosophy proclaims; knowledge has enslaved us, has made us wholly at the mercy of eternal truths."<sup>13</sup> Nostalgically he quotes Kierkegaard, saying that "in the state of innocence there is peace and tranquility." On the other hand, seeing the obvious flaw of a world without knowledge and without the burden of culture, Shestov replies: There is nothingness, the same nothingness that the pagans feared and called fate. However, Fate is the nothingness of fear. Thus, with or without knowledge, homo sapiens has no escape from Fear and Fate. Knowledge has indeed "crashed human consciousness" and led to our Fall. The only new possibility for mankind is to regain Faith, or, as Kierkegaard would say, "to believe in spite of reason," and this would constitute martyrdom. Shestov captures the conceptual transition of the two thinkers, their movement away from the position of the Enlightenment to that of the Romantic philosophers who elevate Feeling or Soul over Mind or Reason. Both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard "leave Hegel for Job, "the ignorant Job," as Shestov describes him. Even more, Kierkegaard went from Hegel to Job and from Socrates to Abraham, solely because Hegel and Socrates demanded that he love Reason, but he hated Reason more than anything else in the world.<sup>14</sup> Shestov, a post-Nietzschean thinker, willingly embraces Dionysus, the God of Paradox, and his absurd world of ignorant bliss, thereby rebelling against Culture, Civilization, Knowledge, and Reason.<sup>15</sup> Neither Plato, nor Socrates would have approved of Kierkegaard's infatuation with Job and Abraham, their respect for Reason and Knowledge would have protected them from the absurd symposium with the naive shepherds, the followers of Faith. Kierkegaard seeks not Wisdom but peace, which he obtains in Faith by defying the rational and the wise. Shestov sees necessity as the cause of the Kierkegaardian metamorphosis.

Necessity, with its heavy, stonelike tread, is closing in on helpless man.<sup>16</sup> Necessity-accepted by Plato and Aristotle, Hegel and Spinoza-would be rejected by both Kierkegaard and his "Russian double" Dostoevsky, who would also neglect Reason, the "god of philosophers," and be drawn to Faith, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."<sup>17</sup> While Tolstoy, another significant existentialist in his own right, would later see Virtue as the opposite of Sin or Vice, both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky still regarded Faith as their opposite. "Faith is Faith in God," concludes Shestov. However, if Kierkegaard's God is a monotheistic entity, Dostoevsky's God is actually not a Christian, but a Hebrew God, a particular deity for a particular nation. Shestov does not doubt Dostoevsky's statements about Faith, accepting them blindly and remains unaware of the basic antinomy in Kierkegaard's "Russian double." "Faith begins where thinking comes to an end"-asserts Kierkegaard, utterly oblivious of the thoughtful choice made by the Russian existentialist about the nature of faith.<sup>18</sup> Having embraced Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's rather modernist positions on Faith as the new revisionist ethical standards-which place no demands on man-Shestov establishes the two forms of the Ethical: one that gives man nothing, but makes demands on him; and one that gives Faith and demands nothing in return. Hence, Shestov obviously neglected the dilemma of Job and Abraham, whose Faith demanded the ultimate sacrifices.<sup>19</sup> Shestov's vision of Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's existential goals based on Faith make him also turn away from Reason. His desire to believe ultimately overpowers his craving for wisdom and knowledge. Shestov could not possibly have been unaware of the general or universal in Christianity. Nonetheless, he passionately stated: "The religious dwells above and beyond the sphere of the 'general'."<sup>20</sup>

Ludwig Feuerbach's Lectures on Christianity had served as a "materialist Bible" for numerous nineteenth-century Russian populists, nihilists, materialists, utopian socialists and the twentieth-century Russian pseudo-- communists, who would reject Shestov's postulate.<sup>21</sup> Feuerbach would elevate and welcome the category of the general in the Christian doctrine. Dostoevsky, in his Slavophilic anxiety, needed a Russian, i.e., a particular god for his own particular tribe, i.e., the Russian people, while Shestov, a Russian Jew, burdened by the mythical consciousness of his own distant Hebrew ancestors, would find this rather appealing as well.<sup>22</sup> The divinity forum and the assembly of gods, a clearly pre-Christian typology, had been revived by Shestov and

Dostoevsky who both had difficulty with the general or universal. Kierkegaard, unlike Dostoevsky, speaks about the difficulty of being a Christian-loving all humans, despite their sins, trespasses and temptations, finding it quite "an impossible" faith. Shestov concludes his discovery of Kierkegaard on a highly pessimistic note:

Fear of Nothingness compels man to search for refuge and protection in knowledge, i.e., in truths which are uncreated, independent of anyone, general and necessary, and, as we think, capable of saving us from the fortuities of free will with which existence is inundated.<sup>23</sup>

Much like Dostoevsky, Shestov concludes that the "opposite of sin is not virtue, but freedom. Freedom from all fears, freedom from coercion."<sup>24</sup> It is also freedom from knowledge which may bring the ultimate happiness-the promised land. After all, as he would claim, "[i]n order to reach the promised land, it is not necessary to have knowledge."<sup>25</sup> In Shestov's view, Faith is the promised land, the place where the believer finally arrives and where Shestov, along with Kierkegaard, invites his readers to come in order to accept their existential philosophy, based on Faith rather than Trust.<sup>26</sup> Shestov identifies himself with Kierkegaard, as the spokesman of Faith, the lonely voice in the global philosophical community. He assumes the role of the discoverer of this lonely voice, preaching in the wilderness and even elevating him to a new god or saint, next to Abraham or Job. After all, somebody who has defied the "god of the philosophers"-Reason-must be a divine figure himself.

#### **IV. PIAMA GAIDENKO AND KIERKEGAARD: DISCOVERING THE SOURCE OF PASSIPN**

Thirty-five years after Lev Shestov, and more than a decade after Stalin's death, a Soviet scholar, Piama Gaidenko, would undertake a revised analysis of Kierkegaard in her book *Tragediia estetizma* (The Tragedy of Aestheticism).<sup>27</sup> She begins, focusing simultaneously on the originality of Kierkegaard's philosophical thinking and his unusual creative biography. Unlike Shestov, she does not claim to be a "Russian Columbus." She informs the reader about the first Russian translations of Kierkegaard, dating from 1894 and 1895, a time when Ibsen's plays were popular. Gaidenko summarizes the general body of interpretation of Kierkegaard's works and divides them into four main groups:

existential, protestant-theological, Freudian, and Catholic. For obvious reasons, Gaidenko does not dwell on the last three approaches to Kierkegaard but devotes her attention mainly to the "existential" treatment of his works. In her view, despite Kierkegaard's reputation as the "the father of existentialism," most existentialists never mention Kierkegaard. Jaspers, Sartre and Heidegger allegedly moved away from Kierkegaard, while the only devotees that remained were Lev Shestov and Albert Camus, both having shared Kierkegaard's "corrective spirit of the epoch," namely, the revisionist attitude toward philosophy. If Hegel (the major acceptable philosophical icon in Soviet Russia) regarded philosophy as the highest form of knowledge, and philosophical activity as the ultimate genuine form of human existence, Gaidenko draws attention to Kierkegaard's rejection of the Hegelian dictum. She quotes the famous utterance by Kierkegaard, "What should I do if I do not wish to become a philosopher?" And this quotation introduces the readers to a new Kierkegaard, an ironic thinker, whose irony and rejection of the traditional would create a new image of the Danish existentialist, as the precursor of the new postmodern morality and ethics. Thus, the ironic mode of discourse and irony per se became the main focus of Gaidenko's interpretation of Kierkegaard. This new Kierkegaard is neither a Christian thinker, nor an idealist bourgeois obscurantist. He appears, instead, as a master of modern paradox, as a creator of a new existential carnival rooted in Desire, Feeling, and Pleasure rather than in Reasonable Being predicated on Moral Choice.

First and foremost, Gaidenko alerts modern readers and historians of philosophy to the fact that the prolific Danish existentialist wrote under various pseudonyms. She arrives at a total of twelve, including Victor Eremita from *Either/Or*, Johannes de Silentio from *Fear and Trembling*, Nikolay Notabene from the Preface, Johannes Climacus, etc. Seeking a key to the interpretation of the Kierkegaardian system, Gaidenko does not limit her search to the categories within but examines the signs outside it, using the names of the imaginary authors or pseudonyms as her semiotic tools. Kierkegaard's choice of the formal devices is not new, Gaidenko observes. She pinpoints that this peculiar discursive play is not an original invention of the Danish early modernist but a borrowing from the ancient Greek performative tradition. Plato was known to have been rather fond of the polyphonic style of discourse, and skillful in introducing some famous speakers into his dialogues. The major difference, though, is that the Kierkegaardian interlocutors are not

real historical figures, like Socrates, for instance, but imaginary protagonists, helping him to develop his complex position, which is frequently meant not to be easily revealed but to puzzle, entertain and envelop in mystery. In her definition of the Kierkegaardian style, Gaidenko relies on Martin Thust and Robert Heiss who attempted to deal with the artistic qualities of the Danish philosopher.<sup>28</sup> What Thust and Heiss regard as an indirect discursive method of reviving the Biblical ancient texts in an innovative artistic manner, Gaidenko sees instead as a multilayered ironic text in the spirit of Socrates.

She traces the Kierkegaardian fascination with irony to his youth, to his student days and to his doctoral thesis on the "Concept of Irony with the Repeated Reference to Socrates." The author believes that Kierkegaard's interest in irony was not only his natural response to the Romantic ethos of his time, but had a much more profound meaning, beyond the more commonly accepted playfulness. Already in his doctoral thesis, as Gaidenko reports, Kierkegaard had defined irony as a "specific negation," and had presented Socrates as a tragic figure, a victim of his own irony and negation. This recourse to the early Kierkegaard enables the reader not only to see the evolution of his thought but appreciate fully his profound insights into human existence and tragedy.

This glimpse of Socrates as the master of irony connects the ancient Greek past, the Romantic European present and the neo-Romantic future when Negation would become the state of mind and the new worldview, the new consciousness, another cognitive tool, an original stimulus to discourse and an inspiration to creativity in a largely uncreative universe.<sup>29</sup> The Kierkegaardian recourse to irony stands in the shadow of Fichte, Goethe, Schiller, Schelling, Schlegel, and Hegel. However, Kierkegaard distinguishes the tragic irony of Socrates from the playful irony of his romantic contemporaries and simultaneously from the tasteless irony of the future troubled, confused postmodernists. Analyzing the distinctive power of the irony of Socrates, Kierkegaard concludes that irony should be tamed. This early debate on irony is already a clear indication of his rift with the Romantics and Hegel. The Hegelian Socrates is a moral thinker while the Kierkegaardian Socrates is an individual without a moral principle or a moral goal in life. Unlike the Hegelian Socrates, Kierkegaard's Socrates dies-not as a hero, but as a failure, a confused master of Negation who had ruined the world around him with his own destructive irony. This analysis of irony and negation is perceptively treated by Gaidenko as the Kierkegaardian plunge into the abyss of a quasi postmodernist ironic mode, during

which Kierkegaard himself evolves from an aesthetic playful Romantic into a demonic neoromantic figure, whom Kierkegaard discovered "long before its appearance in the neoromantic art of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century."<sup>30</sup>

## **V. ROMANTIC AND YET ALREADY MODERNIST**

Defining the Kierkegaardian world, his analysis and style of irony, Gaidenko not only establishes the generic type of his writings, the running motif in the entire body of his writings, but redefines his place in the history of European culture for anticipating the future ethical and philosophical crisis of postmodernity. The ironic manner enables the author to distance himself from his own voice, to hear it from the outside. Gaidenko calls the Kierkegaardian style "parody making":

This method of parody making used by the ironist, parodying himself, enables him to fly above his own works [logos], without destroying their inner structure and violating closure, while remaining incognito, preserving one's absolute state of [incognito] undetectability and anonymity—these are the features particularly emphasized by Kierkegaard.<sup>31</sup>

The tragedy of the world, as Gaidenko sees it, lies in its inability to lid itself of the destructive irony. She alludes to the passage from *Either/Or* where Kierkegaard relates the story of a clown who comes on stage to inform the public about a fire in the theatre. He does not joke any more: the fire is real but the audience continues to applaud, unable to distinguish between the real and the imaginary worlds. Responding to this Kierkegaardian comment on the untimeliness of irony, Gaidenko claims that the "ironizing poet" is a clown who informs the world about the coming destruction, during a storm of applause and amidst communal rejoicing."<sup>32</sup> Comparing Schlegel's and Kierkegaard's irony, Gaidenko establishes the boundaries between those two types of discourses which presumably lie in the different notions of Freedom, Superiority and Destiny:

Schlegel's ironist perpetually plays his part, and his freedom lies precisely in this act, as well as in his superiority over others. While the Kierkegaardian clown acts against his own will, simply because he would not be allowed to stop: his destiny--to remain forever the comic version of the eternal Cassandra who provokes even greater laughter, even

when she tries to speak seriously. Kierkegaard's irony is not victorious, as he himself says in his dissertation, but "a tragic one." Kierkegaard's self-ironizing is not a freely chosen position, like Schlegel's, but a destiny. A poet screams and his cry is perceived as "beautiful music," accompanying the world as if hypnotized, and flying into the abyss of damnation.<sup>33</sup>

According to Gaidenko's analysis of Kierkegaard's passions, Romantic irony is a product of an intense exploration of one's inner world, during the erotically intense "I" and "thou" relationship. Kierkegaard indeed shared the Romantic worldview of some of his contemporaries who admired Beauty, Love, and women as the source of both. For many Romantics, the goal of existence lay solely in the private sphere, confined to the enjoyment of Beauty and in the primacy of the Aesthetic. Gaidenko views his *Either/Or* as a multivoiced ancient Greek choir where one hears the voices of Kant, Fichte, Schiller, Schelling, and Novalis. "It is a philosophical novel and a novel of ideas, unsurpassed by anybody. Here the battle of ideas acquires a much purer form than, for example, in Dostoevsky's novels."<sup>34</sup> She captures the uniqueness of Kierkegaard's world which anticipates the modernist ironic universe by nearly half a century.

This statement deserves an analytical pause. Unlike Shestov, Gaidenko leaves the realm of patriotic myth and the heroic paradigm of the national, placing the Danish existentialist higher than his Russian double, Dostoevsky. It is a clear indication of an independent judgement that is in conflict with the rising nationalism of the 1970s—particularly the Russian chauvinism and dogmatism of Soviet scholarship. The second chapter of Gaidenko's book deals with aestheticism as a worldview in Kant, Schiller, Schlegel, Holderlin, and Novalis. Without mentioning Kierkegaard in this chapter, the author introduces the notion of irony as a modality and byproduct of aestheticism. This helps her to establish the classificatory principle of the Aesthetic, placing Kierkegaard within the system of European romantic aestheticism. Gaidenko acknowledges that Dostoevsky's "Danish double" has much in common with Schelling, Schiller and Kant. For Gaidenko, the aesthetic is the unifying principle, "the nerve of the romantic worldview," be it ironic, tragic, active/heroic, or passive/didactic. Here, the author adds a new dimension to the characterization of the Romantics and their attitude to the world:

Romantics accept every point of view, precisely because they do not carry any real responsibility for anything-their infinite "I," reflecting beauty, and the finite "I," living in the daily bourgeois world, are completely isolated; the concept of play as the highest form of existence of the individual provides the ontological basis.<sup>35</sup>

For the rest of the Romantics the playful attitude is a desire to exist in the real-with the imaginary world legitimizing the realization of the "I" and expanding the Romantic self. For Kierkegaard, it is the awareness of Play itself that is of utmost importance for the full expression of the ironic self and the extension of the Romantic identity. Gaidenko argues that "the stand of the ironist is thus the aesthetic one, placing the emphasis not on the fact that all myths are "real," but on the fact that they all are [exist]."<sup>36</sup> This way, Gaidenko creates a semiotic universal paradigm, based on primary oppositions, where the philosophical positions of the Romantics and the Kierkegaardian stand complement each other:

Romantics

The existential goal is

- \* to believe
- \* to play
- \* to die heroically

Kierkegaard

The existential goal is

- \* to analyze
- \* to ironize
- \* to die in despair

The Soviet post-Stalinist philosopher manages to distinguish between the complex worldview of Kierkegaard and his romantic contemporaries, placing the Danish

existentialist ahead of his century, into the post-postmodern time of Confusion and Despair, which he anticipated thanks to his neo-Platonic reconsideration of irony. Due to the innovative usage of irony the Kierkegaardian approach to Being moves him closer to Michael Foucault and Derrida, and away from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.<sup>37</sup>

## **VI. KIERKEGAARD AND DOSTOEVSKY**

If Romantics had a clear understanding of the heroic individual, conquering existential obstacles, Kierkegaard pictures the unheroic despair of a tormented human being, "who falls apart into a thousand parts, being likened to the legion of the expelled devils, when he loses the most precious, the most sacred for men-the unifying power of the individuality, his only real "I."<sup>38</sup> Here, quoting from *Either/Or*, Gaidenko fails to notice the remarkable image of the devils, missing the opportunity to invoke Dostoevsky. However, the passage that she does quote, provides precisely the classificatory solution that she seeks. Gaidenko attempts to identify the Kierkegaardian existential philosophy within the locked Romantic paradigm, obviously attributing far greater importance to him than to the rest of the Romantics. Her discovery of the ironic Self in Kierkegaard is most significant. His human being in despair, victimized by one's own devils, possessed by tormenting desires and incapable of Faith, is the remarkable precursor of the post-Freudian man. Kierkegaard, in Gaidenko's view, moves much further than Schlegel, Novalis and Hoffmann, with their escapist aestheticism of the fantastic. He accepts the despair of the Real, seeing no escape, except in irony and melancholy-that "hysteria of spirit," which Freud would later define as "modern nervousness." In contrast to Freud, who would prescribe indulgence and unrestrained libido, Kierkegaard meekly accepts suffering, with the stoicism of a faithful believer. His remedy lies in irony and play, and this makes him akin to the future modernists, leaving the Romantics behind. Longing and melancholy-these inescapable parts of a Romantic identity so much condemned by Kierkegaard-were, ironically, his lifetime companions. He would seek escape in Faith, but this is something that Gaidenko, a member of an officially atheistic state, cannot dwell upon.

Gaidenko sees *Either/Or* as the epistemological goal of Kierkegaard's teaching, which he himself defined as "the principle of the essence of the human Will but not human Reason." She captures its essentially depressive mood.<sup>39</sup> His existential pessimism lies

in his perception of philosophy per se and its ancient roots, leading to Doubt, Fear, and Faith. Gaidenko challenges the Kierkegaardian vision of these roots and his view that doubt could be the best counsel and guidance for man. As she puts it, "doubt may only give birth to free thought but not to a free individual."<sup>40</sup> However, Kierkegaard believed that existence would finally free humans from Doubt on the road to Despair, the ultimate stage of human Reason where one would have to commit the ultimate heroism, i.e., recognize one's own insignificance.<sup>41</sup> Here, she places Kierkegaard again in opposition to other European philosophers. Human freedom is defined not as a sphere of knowledge, but as a sphere of Good and Evil.<sup>42</sup> For instance, if Napoleon is Hegel's hero, with his heroic deeds, guided by the World Spirit, the Kierkegaardian hero is Man, searching for Good and escaping Evil. If the Kantian man is an individual, guided by the ethical and comprehended by Reason (but one who does not choose his own destiny), the Kierkegaardian man allegedly chooses his own Self, or gives birth to the modern Self with the help of irony. The Kantian man may act, but his actions are presumably irrelevant for the World Order, The Kierkegaardian man is a responsible individual, whose behaviour or choice of actions are of cosmic relevance to Existence at large. Thus, the basic differentiating moment between Kantian and Kierkegaardian ethics lies in the concept of Repentance and irrevocable responsibility before the community, family, group, nation, and state. This is where Kierkegaard's man is so much different from the future Freudian "modern nervous" man, the alleged victim of the family, state and church, owing nothing to them, and angrily and childishly dismissing them. Kierkegaard's man in despair is much more akin to Dostoevsky's suffering man, who is possessed by the devils of his own desire, a tormented pagan, redeemed by faith in Christ. Gaidenko cannot talk about this, but it is clear from the structure of her arguments. Kierkegaard's fearful man is akin to Dostoevsky's repenting sinner; they are both too weak in spirit to accept the Kantian moral imperative and Christianity, which ultimately require a superhuman effort from them, as Kierkegaard confesses in his Diaries.

## **VII. THE ETHICAL VERSUS THE AESTHETIC**

Accepting that human faults are not a given, but rather something chosen, Kierkegaard raises the level of moral responsibility for one's actions, coming totally into conflict with the Romantic ethos of the nineteenth century and the passive resignation before Destiny. The Kierkegaardian man consciously chooses his sins and his confessions, as well as the

ultimate free dialogue with God, which Gaidenko interprets as a "human duty to be one's own self, to find oneself."<sup>43</sup> Having envisaged human obsession with Otherness in the man of the future and his future unhappiness, Kierkegaard places the ethical higher than the aesthetic. In this sense, he anticipates the entire movement of Aestheticism in Europe. Oscar Wilde, for instance, would later proclaim his decadent dictum-"Aesthetics is higher than ethics"-while Kierkegaard would state in his *Either/Or*:

The person who lives aesthetically is an accidental human being, he believes he is the perfect human being by being the one and only human being. The person who lives ethically works toward becoming the universal human being.<sup>44</sup>

In her last chapter, called "Demonic Aestheticism and the Religion of the Absurd," Gaidenko introduces the Kierkegaardian vision of Don Juan and Faust as the cultural archetypes of the Christian period of cultural production. Following Kierkegaard, Gaidenko proves that Don Juan is "the expressive spirit of culture born by the Christian faith."<sup>45</sup> Sensuality was always present, but Christianity would introduce it in a new form--in the form of the forbidden fruit, legitimizing its new existence.

In this sense, music, with its eternally sensual components, was another form of spirit that needed to be tamed by Christianity. The nineteenth-century Romantics reconsidered the role of music, its liberating powers and escapism, making it another form of imaginary reality. Romantics, who worshiped poetry and created the Cult of the Poet, also elevated music to a new divine reality. Following the Kierkegaardian concept of the erotic and rediscovery of Being (tamed and reformed by Christianity through denial), Gaidenko reaffirms music as an expression of the sensual and even demonic, as Kierkegaard used to claim in his *Either/Or*.<sup>46</sup> Gaidenko successfully points out that one could find the same understanding of music in the late Tolstoy.<sup>47</sup> There is the same embodiment of Evil in his philosophical universe as in the Kierkegaardian system. Introducing the paradigm of Good and Evil, Gaidenko logically comes to Dostoevsky's construct of the human devil, his Man-God, or Man-Satan. If Shestov had diagnosed the spiritual affinity between Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, having immortalized it in his expanded notion of a Double, Gaidenko, relying on the research of Iakov Golosovker, suggests another plausible etiology for the Danish "double," namely in Kantian aesthetics via Schellingian and Christian ethics.<sup>48</sup> However, Gaidenko does not share Golosovker's

view on the role of Kant in Dostoevsky's ethics. She believes that Schelling—who dealt extensively with the problem of Freedom and was much more popular in nineteenth-century Russia—might have been a far greater source of influence on him. At any rate, Gaidenko introduces another aspect of Shestov's Double: "aestheticism and the indulgence in the forbidden as the most important theme in Dostoevsky's writings."<sup>49</sup> Deconstructing the Kierkegaardian paradigm of Good and Evil, one might distinguish in Gaidenko's psychological insight two particular types of human visions of the world:

Pagan

- \* light

- \* unaware of sin

- \* sensual

- \* unified

Christian darker

- \* aware of sin

- \* dutiful

- \* split

The model is reminiscent of the Hegelian categories, but if Hegel unites the religious and the ethical, Kierkegaard, in Gaidenko's view, finds them mutually exclusive.

In the end, Gaidenko returns again to irony. The greatest ironic icon is the Kierkegaardian God of Abraham, who is "absolutely free and capricious." She concludes her interpretation of Kierkegaard on a note of disagreement with Shestov, maintaining that the Kierkegaardian tragedy was not in his physical ailments, as Shestov believed, but in his paradoxical faith, in the self-imposed ironic Self, so much akin to the post-modern identity of the twentieth century.

Kierkegaard, throughout his entire life, had lived to overcome his split individuality but remained split; his entire life he spent preaching that man should overcome despair--and yet he lived in despair himself. He would fight passionately to have philosophy taken seriously but remained an ironist in his actions and his works; he always sought salvation in faith and yet could not believe. That is why Kierkegaard is a writer-pseudonym, and that is why paradox is the last word of his teaching, and Socrates is his favorite hero.<sup>50</sup>

Dostoevsky, the most ironic and skillful master of paradox, one of the precursors of postmodernist European philosophy, is indeed, in many aspects, the Kierkegaardian Russian double. After all, existence itself is the deepest irony, compounded by the interpretations of the real and the imaginary, the ironic doxa.

Despite the intellectual isolation and censorship of the post-Stalin era, Piama Gaidenko still benefited from the twentieth-century philosophical traditions, successfully capturing irony as the main cultural feature in the transition from the Romantic to the "decadent" post-Romantic and modern era. This enabled her not only to construct a Russian image of the Danish existentialist--situating Kierkegaard in the wider European cultural context--but to restore continuity in the ongoing discourse on Truth, Faith, Freedom, and Being.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Our re-visiting of the "Russian Kierkegaard" presents, hopefully, not only the changing image of the Danish philosopher within the peculiar Russian historical context but reveals the profound interdependence between philosophy, history, literature, and politics. In the tsarist period, Kierkegaard's portrait was initially linked to the nineteenth-century "Gospel of Suffering." In the twentieth century, he became "Dostoevsky's Double"--an image created by Shestov in France. During the Stalinist period, he was caricatured as "the evil obscurantist" by the servile and frightened M. Rosental' and P. Iudin. And finally we have Piama Gaidenko's modernist depiction of a "master of paradox and irony." Although deprived of certain analytical tools, Gaidenko's revised analysis of Kierkegaard is the most perceptive in terms of presenting the role and place of his worldview within European existentialism, modernism, philosophy, and cultural history. Plato and Socrates, Job and Christ, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard--all constitute our shared path of Knowledge and common cultural property. Faith and Doubt, Fear and Courage, Truth and

Untruth, Good and Evil-these are the demons that possess us all, and Kierkegaard's anticipation of the modernist "religion of the absurd" is not alien to the Russians, Europe's late cultural bloomers.

\* To the memory of Professor George Luckyj (1919-2001), the founder of Canadian Slavonic Papers and my first Canadian mentor.

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19 Anna Makolkin, *The Genealogy of Our Present Moral Disarray* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

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27 Piama P. Gaidenko, *Tragediia estetizma: Opyt kharakteristiki mirosozertsanii Serena Kirkegora* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970). Piama Pavlovna Gaidenko [Haidenko], b. 1934, in Ukraine, became one of the major contemporary Russian historians of philosophy. In the Stalin and post-Stalin era she wrote about German philosophers,

later moved away from Kant, Hegel, and the "problems of German idealism" to the history of ancient Greek and world philosophy. Existentialism, phenomenology, the problem of the invariants, and the history of ideas, Russian philosophy-all have been covered in her work. Her most recent book is *Istoriia grecheskoi filosofi i ee sviazi s naukoii* (A History of Greek Philosophy and Science) (Moscow: Universitetskaia kniga, 2000). Her name entered the most recent pantheon, *Filosofy Rossii XIX-XX stoletii* (Russian Philosophers of the 19th--20th Centuries (Moscow, 1995).

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