

## **N. A. BERDYAEV (BERDIAEV)** **LEV SHESTOV AND KIERKEGAARD**

(1936 - #419)

The book of L. Shestov about Kierkegaard,<sup>1</sup> beautifully translated into the French language, -- is perhaps the finest of his books. It was brilliantly written, just like the greater part of the books of this author. In it his fundamental thought is expressed with the greatest of concentration, but also with the greatest of clarity, if perchance it be possible to demand clarity of a thinker, who negates thought and struggles against knowledge. The formal deficiency of the book is in the fatiguingly frequent repetition time and again, of certain of those phrases, expressing evidently great importance for the author. I consider L. Shestov a very remarkable and original thinker and I quite esteem his problematics, I much sympathise with his struggle against the force of the "general" over human life, the struggle against necessity, and his thirst for freedom. But only his negative philosophy is rich and diffuse, his positive philosophy is indigent and short, and it could perhaps fit on half a page. It cannot be otherwise, -- that which he is about cannot be expressed in thought and word, since this is pure apophatics. But together with this he remains in the realm of thinking and reason. In the book on Kierkegaard I even come upon a cosmogonic end, though but briefly expressed. This is nonetheless a construct of mind, though at the basis of this construct lies the tragic experience of the life of L. Shestov himself and his beloved heroes. And as might be expected, as regards the book of L. Shestov it is impossible to learn of Kierkegaard himself, and one learns only of the author of the book. Kierkegaard was however a fine subject for the unraveling of themes, which torment him himself and to which he devoted all his creativity. Though there is much of Kierkegaard that he does not take note of. But Kierkegaard is especially close to him, he is shaken by his fate, and the encounter with him was an important event for him. L. Shestov -- is an existential philosopher. But existential philosophy, i.e. a philosophy which is oriented towards the subject and not towards the object, cannot be only a narrative about the survivings of human misfortune. A survived tragedy can be a source of knowledge, but the survived tragedy itself is not yet philosophy. Philosophic knowledge is an act of cogitation, effected by the thinker in regard to the survived tragedy. L. Shestov negates this cogitative act as being inspired by the serpent of old. But with inconsistency he does it all the same, and this saves him as a thinker. The difficulties, those which stand before L. Shestov, when he wants to express his theme, are so great, that they could make for his position as a philosopher of the hopeless. He, perhaps, might be reduced to silence. But all this resolves itself in the books of L. Shestov, and it receives even the illusion of clarity. This can be explained by the literary talent of L. Shestov, by the irony, to which he constantly resorts in his exposition, and by the suborned lyricism, by the extraordinary sensitivity, all which impart an especial humanness to his writings. Only in an emotive language is that which he says understandable, in a language indeed intellectual, which for L. Shestov very characteristically moreover is conveyed with difficulty. It becomes impossible to part with the impression, that L. Shestov fights first of all against himself, against a peculiar rationalism, against peculiar rationalistic hindrances to faith. And he wants to persuade us, that all these rationalistic obstacles -- that all of them are situated within the force of the wicked reason. This can prove convincing since it is a matter almost exclusively of philosophers, with people's knowledge, and it is with them that he contends, without resort to the witnesses of faith. In essence, Shestov's thought is very despotic. Despotism of thought is always the result of a bi-polar action of the world and direction of thought. One polarity of this action is a dark kingdom -- Greek philosophy, Socrates, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, knowledge, reason and morals, general obligatory truths, necessity. The other polarity of action is a bright kingdom -- the Bible, or more exactly certain aspects of the Bible, Tertulian, Pascal, Luther, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, faith, the unbounded possibilities of "beyond good and evil", life, freedom. For the dark realm of reason, morals and knowledge, there is essentially no salvation,

there is none for almost all the philosophers, for the greatest of them. When I finished the last book of Shestov, a very tumultuous book, I had the painful impression, that it was all set together based on conditions, and that the author was not convinced of the actual existence of this set of conditions. If God is, then there exist unbounded possibilities, and then that which once was -- whether the poisoning of Socrates, the progressive crippling up of Nietzsche, the losing of his bride for Kierkegaard -- all can be undone. Thereupon is made possible a victory over necessity, of the crippling up of life for us, and there is made possible a free and paradisaical life. But the thought of L. Shestov bears a particularly tragic character in that God, for Whom all is possible, Who is above all sorts of necessity and all universally-binding truths, remains conditionally hypothetical. God is postulated for a salvation from the force of reason and morals, similar to how Kant postulated morality for salvation. L. Shestov is strong with his negation, but not with his affirmation, with his anguish for faith, but not with his faith. His books give sooner the impression, that the ultimate world belongs to reason, to universally-binding truths, morals, necessity, and the impossibility of deliverance for Nietzsche and for Kierkegaard.

The chief thing for L. Shestov is faith. In this he was close to Luther. The opposite to sin is not virtue, but faith. Faith alone can save, faith alone in God, for Whom everything is possible, Who is not bound by any sort of necessity, Who could return to Job his oxen and his children, to Abraham his Isaac, to Kierkegaard his Regina Olsen and suchlike. Outside of faith there is no salvation from the force of necessity. But how is faith possible and of whom is it possible? Reading L. Shestov gives the impression, that faith is impossible and that no one has it, with the exception of Abraham alone, who held the knife over his beloved son Isaac. L. Shestov does not believe, that so-called "believers" have faith. Even the great saints do not have it. No one that moves mountains. Faith does not depend on man, it is sent by God. To nearly no one does God give faith, for He did not give it to Kierkegaard, nor did He give it to any of Shestov's tragic heroes. The sole pathway appears hidden. L. Shestov composed for himself a maximalist concept about faith, under which it is rendered impossible and that no one can have it. But this conception of faith does not correspond with all the greatest witnesses of faith in the history of the human spirit, with the witness of the Apostle Paul and of all the apostles and saints, and prophets and religious reformers. For L. Shestov faith is the end of the human tragedy, the end of the struggle, the end to the sufferings, the ensuing of boundless possibilities and paradisaical life. This is an erroneous conception of faith, and for many it appears as a pretense, a justification of unbelief. Faith is not an end, it is not paradisaical life, but rather it is the beginning of the arduous path, the beginning of heroic struggle, that L. Shestov does not want. The believer perseveres to take upon himself the burden of the world of necessity, he shares in the burden of unbelievers. The believer proceeds on through tribulations and doubts and divisions. Human nature remains active, not passive. L. Shestov concocted his own understanding of faith, since he connected the bliss of paradise with the passivity of human nature. The activity of human nature for him is reason, knowledge, morals. And freedom for him is received only from God, man has no part in it, he merely uses and delights in freedom, he contemplates the morning star, and in love unites himself with a princess. Nothing so appeals to L. Shestov, as heroism. The passivity of human nature in regard to God is always another form of quietism. L. Shestov appeals to the Bible and to revelation, so as to liberate man from the domination of Socrates and Greek philosophy, from the domination of reason and morals, from the domination of universally-binding truths. But from the Bible he appropriates only that, which he needs for his theme. He is not a Biblical man, he is a man of the XIX and beginning XX Centuries. Nietzsche is closer for him than the Bible and remains a chief influence on his life. He makes a Biblical transcribing of the Nietzschean theme, of the Nietzschean struggle with Socrates, with reason and morals in the name of "life". The Bible for him almost exhausts itself with speaking about the Fall into sin, about Abraham and Job. He as it were forgets, that the chief and central figure of Biblical revelation is not Abraham, but rather that one who speaks face to face with God, -- Moses. But the Biblical revelation of God through Moses,

which comprises the foundation of Judaism and Christianity in the Old Testament, is a revelation of law, of the Ten Commandments. It is quite clear, that Moses was not useful for L. Shestov, he was not his man, and he haplessly puts him into the lineage of Socrates. And with all this, what could be more Biblical, than Moses? Abraham, holding the knife over his beloved son, is for both Kierkegaard and for L. Shestov is only a literary figure, illustrating their theme about faith as the sphere of unlimited possibilities. The image of Abraham is disturbing, but in it is revealed the yet primordial belief about the propitiation of Divinity through human sacrificial offerings.

In what is the fundamental idea of L. Shestov, if it be permissible to speak about ideas in regard to him? This idea is expressed in his latest book with great talent and brilliance, and with a great power of concentration. L. Shestov relates his myth about the world-creation and the Fall into sin. This is a whole concise cosmology. God is absolutely free, by no sort of truths is He bound, and for Him everything is possible, and He created the world and man. And everything was "exceedingly good". The genesis was from God, the worldly and the human life from God was beautiful. Life was paradisaical. Life in paradise was nourished off the tree of life. But herewith from the abyss of non-being came the serpent, and the voice of the serpent seduced man. He tempted man with the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Knowledge dominates the world, and paradise is ended, and fear and suffering begin. The abyss of non-being (нѣнт) through the temptation of knowledge transforms itself necessity (the eternal truths of knowledge), necessity transforms itself into reason and morals, reason and morals transform themselves into eternity. L. Shestov is hostile to eternity, he sees in it the ultimate transformation of non-being: eternity is from the serpent, and not from God. He is hostile likewise to spirit and the mystical. Eternity, spirit, the mystical, the other world -- this is all but the fictitious fabrications of reason in consequence of the loss of the sole reality of the earthly life, wrought by God. L. Shestov is hostile to eternity because, under eternity he understands it to be the eternal truths of reason, the eternal laws of nature, i.e. necessity. And indeed how can there be with this eternal life the concretely living existences, the eternal life of Job, Socrates, the hapless Nietzsche and the hapless Kierkegaard, and L. Shestov himself? Hostility towards this eternity would in effect be an acknowledgement of death as having the last word on life. But what sort of paradisaical life can there be afront the gravity of death? So also is the hostility of L. Shestov towards spirit. Under spirit, he understands it as reason, and the necessity begotten by it. But under spirit it is possible to conceive of freedom, the liberation from the realm of necessity, and this is an uniquely eternal concept. However strange it might seem, but in L. Shestov there can be discerned a very strong element of Manichaeism. For him the world is situated in the interminable power of the serpent. The world is governed by necessity, which is a transformation of non-being, i.e. the world is governed by the serpent, it is governed through reason with its immutable truth and good. Nowhere and in nothing is there any evidence, that God has acted within the world. God acts exclusively through faith, but as we have already seen, no one at present has faith. It is impossible to find freedom anywhere. The highest point of worldly life -- is the torments and spasms of man, the despair of suchlike people as Kierkegaard. No sort of pathway opens up for L. Shestov. Every pathway belongs to the realm of the everyday ordinary. It is interesting to fathom, what L. Shestov thinks of, when he speaks about God. In his book on Kierkegaard this is almost completely made clear. God is unbounded possibilities, and these limitless possibilities are necessary for the fulfilling of human desires, for this, -- to make the great misfortunes that are lived through by man, non-existent. God is the restoring of his beloved son Isaac to Abraham, of oxen and children to Job, the restoring to health of Nietzsche, Regina Olsen to Kierkegaard; God is in that of the poor youth dreaming about a princess should receive the princess, and in order that the underground man can "drink tea" ("nor be there peace either for me to drink tea"). But why is L. Shestov so convinced, that God as absolutely free (the freedom of God is almost identified with arbitrariness), should want to return Regina Olsen to Kierkegaard and to give the princess to the poor dreamy youth? But can it not be that God not at all desired this, and rather He preferred, that Kierkegaard be bereft of bride,

and the poor youth not receive his princess? In this instance, in vain would be the hopes of Kierkegaard and L. Shestov on God. Amidst the number of the boundless possibilities of God there enters in also the possibility, that God does not desire, that Kierkegaard should get Regina Olsen, or the poor youth the princess. It is very possible, that it is not the serpent, not necessity, not reason and knowledge, not Hegel, but rather God which deprived Regina Olsen of Kierkegaard. I even venture to think, that this perhaps may not have been such a bad thing. Regina Olsen in all probability was a very typical petty bourgeois type and amidst happy family life Kierkegaard might perhaps have produced virtuous pastoral sermons and written perhaps banal theological books, but we would not have had his works of genius, and L. Shestov would not have had opportunity to write his fine book about him. "Life", so very enthralling an enemy of reason and knowledge, of spirit and eternity, is not all entirely a beautiful thing. God is not the fulfillment of human desires. God actually is something quite other. Something indeed but that the question about desires is an addendum to. There is a certain poor youth who dreams about a princess. L. Shestov repeats this a thousand times in his book and on this he constructs his knowledge of God. But of course there is another poor youth. And he dreams about the knowledge of the mysteries of being or about scientific discoveries of the mysteries of nature. It would seem, that God cannot grant the desires of this other youth, whose desires can only be satisfied by the serpent, since knowledge would be derived from the serpent, and not from God. L. Shestov does not take notice, that by this he terribly limits the freedom of God and His possibilities. All this is grounded in an idealisation and apotheosis of life, and in this regard he is in the lineage of Lebensphilosophie. Klages, without having the significance of Shestov's religious problematics, likewise wants exclusively a nourishing off the tree of life, and he sees spirit and reason as parasites, sucking out the sap of life. But life is everything. Why is life not knowledge? Knowledge is likewise part of life, it is an event within being. And the youth, dreaming about knowledge, is no wise worse, than the youth dreaming about a princess.

In the book about Kierkegaard, perhaps the first such for L. Shestov, are some unfriendly pages about Christianity. Christianity is given to fall under the lineage of Socrates, of Stoicism, of Idealism, i.e. into the lineage of the serpent, into the lineage of non-being transformed into reason and morals, into eternity. The mystery of Redemption is completely foreign to L. Shestov, and for him redemption is a fabrication of reason. He forgets, that the Cross was for the Jews a scandaled-temptation, and for the Hellenes a folly. In contrast to L. Shestov, it would be far easier for reason to accept God Almighty, for Whom everything be possible, but it is very difficult to accept God Suffering and Crucified. For L. Shestov nothing is said of the Divine sacrifice of love, the Divine crucifixion, and for him this would seem a limiting of the freedom and almightiness of God. This is in consequence of his Judaism. For L. Shestov, the humanly-incarnated God is inadmissible. For God to become Man -- to him this seems admissible for reason and to be fabricated by reason, while at the same time for reason this is an unfathomable mystery and paradox. Permit me here to be a struggler against reason, but I espy within him the rationalist. How strange this be nonetheless, but L. Shestov sees in religion, particularly the Christian religion, "the opium of the people", masking as reason and morals, encouraging the everyday prosaic through promises of a fabricated eternity, of a fabricated spiritual world. Most unacceptable is how L. Shestov decides the question concerning death, which always has disquieted him. Is there an ultimate existence of the concrete being. Does L. Shestov deny merely the eternal truths of reason and morality, or does he likewise deny eternal life? This is a fundamental question. What is to become of the endless strivings of man? On what is it possible to hope? On this, that God is limitless possibilities? But indeed Kierkegaard died, not receiving Regina Olsen, Nietzsche died, without being healed of his terrible illness and not tasting at present the fruits of the tree of life, Socrates was poisoned, and beyond that nothing. We all die without the fulfilling of our endless desires, not tasting at full the fruits of the tree of life. No one in paradise falls out down upon the earth, at this time. What sort of sense is there in Shestov's appeals to God, for Whom everything be possible, Who can deliver Kierkegaard from his torments, if God cannot grant resurrection to eternal life? Shestov's struggle

against reason and ethics proves itself just as powerless before the tragic destiny of man, as do reason and ethics. I repeat, I am often together with L. Shestov in his problematics, in his revolt against the force of the "general", fabricated by reason and ethics over human destiny. But L. Shestov preaches the passivity of man. Man for him is sinful, but not culpable because he is not responsible, because he is passive. God alone is active, but God discloses nothing about Himself in the world. Knowledge however is one of the manifestations of human activity. Reason can be an enslaver of man, but it can also be the servant of man. It is not from knowledge that there occurred the adversity of man and the world, it is altogether unlikely, that it happened from knowledge. Knowledge comes to know of necessity, but it does not create it. Necessity is begotten of objectivisation. The chief philosophical error of L. Shestov that I see is in this, that he does not make distinctions in the forms and levels of knowledge. He likewise believes in the universality and homogeneity of reason, and so also are his rationalistic defenses, though at a point when reason has been altered, differentiated, and reflects the qualities of the condition of man and the relationship of man to man.

NIKOLAI BERDYAEV.

1936

© 2000 by translator Fr. S. Janos

(1936 - 419 - en)

LEV SHESTOV I KIRKEGAARD. In Journal "Sovremennye zapiski", 1936, No.62, p. 376-382.

Reprinted by YMCA Press Paris in 1989 in Berdiaev Collection: "Typy religioznoi mysli v Rossii", (Tom III), ctr. 398-406.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leon Chestov. "Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle". Librairie J. Vrin. Paris. 1936.

---

E-текст по-русский: [Кротова](#) .

[Lev Shestov Website](#) .

[Return to Berdyaev Online Library](#).