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**Anticipating Modern Trends:
Lev Shestov – Between Literary Criticism
and Existential Philosophy**

Literature and philosophy have been traditionally linked in Russian cultural history, and many Russian thinkers have addressed specifically literary issues in their works. Lev Shestov (1866–1938) represents one of the best examples of this phenomenon, his whole philosophy being close to literature in a variety of ways. Regarded as a representative of existential philosophy and a pre-cursor of Sartrean existentialism, Shestov started his writing career essentially as a literary critic with his unconventional studies of Tolstoi and Dostoevskii, and he has also written on other classical Russian writers. In his treatment of literary works he was first and foremost interested in the existential experience of the writer, whose *oeuvre* he regarded mostly as evidence of this experience. This produced some highly original, even if controversial, literary criticism and served as a welcome complement to existing, more conventional, studies on Russian literature. This paper examines Shestov's literary criticism, discusses his method and its conclusions, and demonstrates that in his approach Shestov anticipated such modern critical trends as the psychoanalytical method and the postmodernist method of 'narrative psychology'.

In 1910 Aaron Shteinberg, then an ambitious young man studying in Heidelberg, told Valery Briusov, the editor of *Russkaia Mysl'* that he would like to write like Lev Shestov. To which Briusov replied: 'Only Shestov can write like Shestov'.¹ Of course, Briusov somewhat misrepresented Shteinberg's intentions, for what the latter meant was not to imitate Shestov's writing style, but to follow his pioneering method of introducing philosophy into a purely literary debate. On the other hand, Russian philosophy has been intrinsically connected with Russian literature and, in fact, as Edith Clowes suggests, philosophy in Russia has emerged from under the overcoat of literature just as all Russian writers have

¹ See Aaron Shteinberg, *Друзья моих ранних лет (1911–1928)* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1991), 10. In this and subsequent quotations the translation from Russian is mine.

come out from Gogol's *Overcoat*, according to Dostoevskii's alleged claim.² For Shestov, a philosophical writer, this link with literature was most vital, and he was often regarded, especially at the beginning of his writing career, predominantly as a literary critic, even though he himself ultimately strove to be a philosopher. In response to this, some, like the literary critic Iurii Aikhenvald, felt that Shestov was wasting his significant literary talents on his philosophical writings.³ On the other hand, others remarked on his highly original contribution to literary criticism. Thus, Georgii Adamovich talked of Shestov's insights into the Russian classics, written 'as if on the margins of what others said about them – partly complementing, partly refuting'.⁴ In Adamovich's estimation, 'Shestov's guesses and hints sometimes give us a lot' and 'one can find out from him about some Russian writers, and not only about Russian ones [...] something very substantial, which has hitherto remained concealed'.⁵ A similar opinion is expressed by Shestov's friend and translator Boris de Schloezer: 'Shestov breaks decisively with existing [literary-critical] attitudes: with those of his predecessors, as much as with those of his contemporaries. He sets off on his own path, where he is to advance all by himself'.⁶

This distinctive originality stemmed largely from Shestov's existential perspective on reality, including literary reality. For from very early on, he stood for individual existence in its doomed struggle to overcome the stone wall of universal Necessity as embodied in both social and physical laws. In other words, Shestov's focus was on the tragic human predicament, and on searching for ways to overcome the tragedy. He believed that true philosophy can be born not out of surprise, but out of despair, and concentrated on people in extreme existential situations, on broken, isolated, desperate individuals, who, as he said of Chekhov's heroes, have nothing to lose and are faced with an inhuman task – to create from the void. Shestov's philosophy therefore is often labelled a philosophy of tragedy. Its early stage is essentially nihilistic and deconstructive, when Shestov is trying

² See Edith W. Clowes, *Fiction's Overcoat: Russian Literary Culture and the Question of Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), ix–xi.

³ See Iurii Aikhenvald's review in *Русские Ведомости*, (63) 7 March 1905, 3, cited in Clowes, 131.

⁴ Georgii Adamovich, 'Вячеслав Иванов и Лев Шестов' in *Одиночество и свобода* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1955), 254.

⁵ Adamovich, 254–255.

⁶ Boris de Schloezer, 'Preface' to Leon Chestov, *L'homme pris au piège: Pouchkine, Tolstoï, Tchekhov* (Paris: Plon, 1966), 10.

to get to the core of human suffering and finds its source in original sin, when mankind sacrificed its primordial freedom for the fruits of the tree of knowledge. Thus Shestov traces the origin of existential tragedy to Reason, to the rationalistic system of beliefs, to which he, especially later on, in his more constructive period, opposes irrationalism or infinite faith in the omnipotent God for whom 'all things are possible'.

This perspective, in fact, was born under the strong influence of Nietzsche, and can be inscribed into the general crisis of nihilism prevalent in Europe at the time. The existential problematics which turned away from social issues and political doctrines such as Marxism towards the individual soul and a relationship with the self, was in a way a double-faced Janus: on the one hand it nostalgically paid tribute to the nineteenth century when 'much less stood between the individual and his thoughts about himself'⁷ (to use Brodskii's words); on the other hand, it looked into the future. Indeed, as Erofeev suggests, for Shestov 'the idea of a decisive break of the individual from "others", his immersion in solitude as the only authentic medium for understanding his own nature and searching for the ways to "salvation" was a fatal step prompted by Nietzsche',⁸ and the echo of Shestov's 'Nietzschean' premonitions can be heard throughout the literature of the twentieth century, where the theme of ultimate existential solitude as the inescapable human predicament has become commonplace.

At the same time, Shestov, as a religious philosopher, was an integral part of the religious renaissance that flourished in Russia during his life time. Moreover, as Tatiana Blagova and Boris Emelianov observe, Shestov's philosophy of tragedy cannot be correctly understood 'outside the ideological and moral problematics of the Silver Age, an integral part of which is the existential problematics of the border situations between life and death'.⁹ Equally, the utopian flavour of Shestov's philosophising brings him close to the general spirit of the time with, as Averintsev aptly observed, its general atmosphere of utopia.¹⁰ Many,

⁷ Joseph Brodsky, 'Foreword' to *An Age Ago, A Selection of Nineteenth-Century Russian Poetry*, selected and translated by Alan Myers (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1988), xiv.

⁸ Viktor Erofeev, '“Остается одно: произвол” (Философия одиночества и литературно-эстетическое кредо Льва Шестова)', *Вопросы литературы*, 1975, 10, 187.

⁹ Tatiana Blagova and Boris Emelianov, *Философемы Достоевского. Три интерпретации (Л. Шестов, Н. Бердяев, В. Вышеславцев)* (Ekaterinburg: Ural University Press, 2003), 109.

¹⁰ Sergei Averintsev, 'Судьба и весть Осипа Манделштама' in Осип Манделштам, *Сочинения в двух томах* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1990), vol. 1: *Стихотворения*, 23.

such as Shteinberg and Ivanov-Razumnik, have seen Shestov as a spokesman for decadence and as such as a true representative of his epoch.

By the same token, Louis Shein suggests that ‘psychologically Shestov can be best understood only in the context of the Russian intellectual milieu of his time’, while ‘thematically he must be seen in the context of the Western ideological search for truth’.¹¹ In fact, Shestov’s friendships and intellectual engagements with both Russian and Western European intellectuals (such as Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger) to a certain extent paved the way for major developments in European philosophical thought. Thus Shestov can be viewed as a precursor of Sartrean existentialism and a figure of considerable influence in the French reception of the phenomenological movement, which in turn shaped all the major trends in French philosophy of the twentieth century. As Czeslaw Milosz points out, ‘Shestov was an active force in European letters, and his influence reached deeper than one might surmise from the number of copies of his works sold’.¹² For Albert Camus, for example, Shestov was amongst a handful of ‘the philosophers most important to the new “man of the absurd”’.¹³

Shestov’s existential approach to Russian classics yielded unconventional results, where the writer under study was considered essentially in supra-temporal terms: in his struggle with his own self, rather than inscribed into the political, social or intellectual debates of his time. In a way, Shestov engaged with the central principle of Romanticism: the dynamic relationship between the author and his lyrical hero, when literary creativity merges with self-portraiture, effectively revealing the schism between the writer and the man or, in other words, between ‘pen and soul’. This schism is thus described by Joseph Brodskii: ‘Every writing career starts as a personal quest for sainthood, for self-betterment. Sooner or later, and as a rule quite soon, a man discovers that his pen accomplishes a lot more than his soul. This discovery very often creates an unbearable schism within an individual’.¹⁴

¹¹ Louis Shein, *The Philosophy of Lev Shestov (1866–1938): A Russian Religious Existentialist* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 12.

¹² Czeslaw Milosz, ‘Shestov, or the Purity of Despair’, *Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1977), 101.

¹³ Milosz, 101.

¹⁴ Joseph Brodsky, ‘The Power of the Elements’, in *Less Than One, Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987), 161.

Moreover, according to Sergei Dovlatov, 'literary activity is most probably an attempt to overcome one's own complexes, to eliminate or diminish the tragedy of existence',¹⁵ whereby 'the writer is trying to conceal rather than to reveal', using literature as a protective screen, as a way of seeming rather than of being.¹⁶ Thus, as a natural continuation of an author's life, his literature often replaces it in some sense, and having burst onto paper from the author's subconscious his lyrical hero determines the vector of the author's aspirations.

Shestov, who in fact came to be a representative of neo-Romanticism in Russian philosophical thought, tried as it were to deconstruct this process, or to decipher its results. In his treatment of literary works he was first and foremost interested in the existential experience of the writer, regarding his *oeuvre* mostly as evidence of this experience and often identifying the writer with his heroes. Thus, we are facing a situation where, on the one hand, the romantic tradition itself suggests, as a more or less natural phenomenon, such an identification; yet on the other hand the aforementioned schism between an author's life and literary creativity, the distance between 'the pen and the soul', the problem of 'to be and to seem' in some sense provide the antithesis of such an identification.

Shestov, therefore, in trying to read from the heroes the writer's own convictions and the main aspects of his life and sensibility, simply drags the writer from behind the curtain of his creations. He attempts to bring the author 'out into the open' from the protective cover of his heroes; he finds and points to the writer's inner struggle, to all the aspects of his inner world that the writer by means of his writing is trying to overcome, or sometimes to conceal even from his own self. John Bayley sensed this preoccupation in Shestov when he wrote back in 1970 that 'what interests him is the gap between what a great literary artist thought he was saying (intelligere), and what he was actually saying, with the Godlike confidence of a creator'.¹⁷

In short, Shestov exposes the writer's inner conflict, the undercurrents of his consciousness, by trying to invade the 'forbidden', carefully guarded, secret rift between 'to seem' and 'to be'. Thus, in particular, Shestov's method transforms his literary and philosophical analysis into a form of suspense, into a captivating

¹⁵ Sergei Dovlatov, *Собрание сочинений в трех томах* (St Petersburg: Limus Press, 1993), vol. III, 341.

¹⁶ Igor Efimov, *Эпистолярный роман с Сергеем Довлатовым* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2001), 435.

¹⁷ John Bayley, 'Idealism and Its Critic', *The New York Review of Books*, 14 (12), 18 June 1970, 4.

process of unmasking the writer, and consequently into a secondary literary work where Shestov's own literary hero becomes the writer himself. Blagova and Emelianov define the genre of Shestov's writings as philosophical essay-dramas where thinkers of different times and schools act alongside one another.¹⁸

It may be illuminating to note in relation to this that in his extreme youth Shestov tried to become a writer and a poet, albeit apparently unsuccessfully. Czeslaw Milosz suspects that Shestov's personal drama was in 'lacking the talent to become a poet so as to approach the mystery of existence more directly than through mere concepts'.¹⁹ Thus, Shestov's widely criticized method, which consists of a seemingly arbitrary identification of an author with his heroes is in fact an attempt (not necessarily recognised by Shestov himself) to expose the existing schism between 'the pen' and 'the soul', between the writer's 'divine' literary achievements and his real 'earthly' personality.

In a similar sense, the French scholar Michel Aucouturier has written that

Shestov's critical method resembles [...] the Russian tradition of 'real criticism' where a work of literature is only an excuse rather than an object of study [...] Moreover, the reality that interests Shestov is not the outside world, but the inner world of the writer. Shestov sees in a work of literature a personal confession of the author and the characters are simply representatives of the latter. He is not trying to explain a literary piece, but seeks in it a confirmation of what the writer has lived through – as the only guarantee of the philosophical value of the work. For true philosophy in his eyes can grow only out of an existential revelation.²⁰

At the same time, Shestov's existentialism and irrationalism, his search for personal rather than social salvation, is in itself a rebellion against the realist criticism of Dobroliubov and Belinskii, which is invariably socially oriented and thus highly utilitarian. Interestingly, while Aucouturier traces the connection between Shestov's method and earlier currents of Russian literary criticism (originating with Dobroliubov), Blagova and Emelianov connect it with a later – postmod-

¹⁸ See Blagova and Emelianov, 37.

¹⁹ Milosz, 'Shestov, or the Purity of Despair', 102.

²⁰ Michel Aucouturier, 'Le Dostoïevski de Chestov' in *Diagonales Dostoïevskiennes, Mélanges en L'Honneur de Jacques Catteau*, ed. Marie-Aude Albert (Paris: Presses de L'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), 79.

ernist – method introduced by the French phenomenologist Giles Deleuze, which is marked by high subjectivity and arbitrariness as a deliberate device.²¹

In fact, it is precisely Shestov's concern with the individual rather than the social which allowed him to foresee the global cultural landscape of the future and to embrace a rather post-modernist approach. As Blagova and Emelianov write, 'Shestov managed to sense in a subtle way the cultural dynamics process of the transitional state of the epoch, close to postmodernism, where the relativity principle becomes fundamental and all points of view are of equal validity'.²² Similarly, Shestov's scepticism, adogmatism and somewhat Nietzschean rejection of the accepted hierarchy of values are also similar to post-modernist concepts. In the same way, the post-modernist tendency of contemporary culture towards cynicism, if the latter is regarded as a form of despair, resonates with Shestov's forebodings.

Similarly, if not more directly, Shestov can be associated with the psycho-analytic wing of literary scholarship, and various critics regard him as one of its precursors. Indeed, as has already been implied, exposing the schism between 'pen and soul', 'man and writer' was the result of Shestov's 'pilgrimage through the souls' of famous thinkers (using his own terminology),²³ in order to find salvation from existential tragedy – for himself and for humanity. This was accomplished by reading between the lines and tracing in them the writers' existential experience – effectively by psycho-analyzing them on the basis of the evidence of their creative works. Yet, this 'unmasking' of writers was done in accordance with Shestov's own paradigm and differed from the emerging Freudian school.

What can be labeled as Shestov's paradigm apparently had its origins in his own biography: in 1895, at the age of 29, he underwent a profound personal crisis which resulted in a severe nervous breakdown and went for treatment abroad. It is not known what exactly triggered this trauma, but the chronology suggests that it might have been largely to do with the illegitimate son (Sergei) he fathered by a gentile woman, or with his subsequent involvements with gentile women and his failed attempts to marry them against his parents' will (Shestov was Jewish born, and his parents had very orthodox views on marriage). Subsequently, it seems, he

²¹ Blagova and Emelianov, 110–111.

²² Blagova and Emelianov, 116.

²³ *Странствования по душам* is the subtitle of Shestov's book *На весах Иова* (Paris: Sovremennye Zapiski, 1929).

started looking in every life for a breaking point, for that existential despair which gives rise to true philosophy and, through a catharsis, to a total re-evaluation of values, to borrow Nietzsche's words. Rationalism is then abandoned and the irrational remainder takes the upper hand in one's life. This way of interpreting writers, that is to say 'Shestovizing' them, was famously referred to by Lucien Levy Bruhl as 'hogging the covers'.

Yet in his psychological approach to thinkers under his scrutiny, Shestov operated on the philosophical plane, focusing predominantly on the individual's spiritual drama, the evolution of his own existential philosophy, not exactly detached from, but rather raised above his intimate experience in the sense of the private circumstances of childhood and adolescence, the awakening of sexuality, family relationships, and so on. This is, in brief, what substantially distinguishes Shestov from Freud. In other words, Shestov chose to operate with different – more abstract – categories, and the physiological or sensual for him is rarely, if at all, connected in a dominating way with the moral and spiritual, whereas in psychoanalysis the roots of the spiritual are almost invariably concealed in the physical, and in any case the two are always considered in combination. However, human psychology remained at the core of Shestov's philosophizing, just as it is at the core of the writings of Tolstoi, Dostoevskii and other artists.

Shestov's response to Freudian psycho-analysis was cautious, in part probably due to a difference in perspective, in part because of Freud's attempt to apply a scientific systematic method to the human psyche, to try and squeeze the irrational life of the human soul into the ready-made and above all limited framework of rational categories and constructs.

Yet, one can see a point of contact between Shestov and Freud, which subtly hints at the inner contradictions in the former's philosophy. As Viktor Erofeev observes, 'Shestov's Salvationism in its maximalist foundation is in contradiction with the demands of the cultural tradition, thus bringing the philosopher to a certain cultural nihilism'.²⁴ Importantly, Erofeev stresses that the zeal that inspires Mikhail Gershenzon as Viacheslav Ivanov's opponent in their 'Correspondence From Two Corners' in considering culture a 'system of most subtle forces' is very close to that of Shestov, who delights whenever 'the voice of nature takes

²⁴ Erofeev, 172.

the upper hand over superficial cultural habits'.²⁵ Georgii Adamovich in his article 'Viacheslav Ivanov and Lev Shestov' goes even further, asserting that in his polemics with Gershenzon Ivanov was really speaking over the head of the latter to Shestov.²⁶ Thus essentially Shestov seeks to celebrate what, if taken to its logical conclusion, would in Freud's terms be a victory of the id over the super-ego. Indeed, Freud's concept of the super-ego – the entity which contains internalised norms, morality and taboos, can be interpreted as implying the forced nature of cultural and social norms which are accepted by humans only in order to make their co-existence possible. In other words, the corollary of both Freud's theory and Shestov's attacks on rationalism is an assertion of the purely utilitarian nature of human morality. By the same token, Shestov's assertions, most notably in connection with Chekhov, of the flimsy character of human cultural habits which quickly disintegrate in the face of any serious crisis such as illness or death, are also evidence of his proximity to Freudian perceptions, to a vision of man as grown straight from the animal kingdom.

Apart from being a precursor of the psychoanalytical approach to literature, Shestov in his treatment of writers also anticipates the (very modern) 'narrative psychology' approach. The latter occupies an important place in contemporary psychology and 'attributes a central role to language, but more specifically to "stories", in the process of self-construction'.²⁷ It 'thus considers narratives as fundamental for understanding individuals' lives and constructions of meaning'²⁸ and 'is considered especially important when the object of analysis is personal experience and personal identity'.²⁹ It is therefore normally applied to self-narratives such as 'autobiographies, memoirs, personal and life histories, even interviews' which, as Freeman explains, constitute 'texts of lives, literary artifacts that generally seek to recount in some fashion what these lives were like'.³⁰ Hence 'in

²⁵ Erofeev, 172.

²⁶ See Adamovich, 253–254.

²⁷ M. Freeman, *Re-writing the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), cited in Cento Bull, 'Political violence, stragismo and "civil war": an analysis of the self-narratives of neofascist protagonists', in P. Antonello and A. O'Leary, eds., *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy, 1969–2006* (Oxford: Legenda, forthcoming).

²⁸ Cento Bull, 'Political violence, stragismo and "civil war"'.

²⁹ Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 128.

³⁰ M. Freeman, *Re-writing the Self*, 7; cited in Cento Bull, 2007, 128.

“narrating the self”, people make sense of their lived experience, construct and convey meanings, and also construct their own individual [...] identities’.³¹

In other words, narrative psychology attempts to decode (i.e. deconstruct and reassemble in a more ‘authentic’ way) the self-myth inherent in self-narratives. This is, however, precisely what Shestov tries to do in his analysis of literary works. Thus he essentially treats fictional literature as a self-narrative of the author, as if it were a ‘coded autobiography’ or memoir of sorts. In this respect, Andrew Wachtel’s claim that Tolstoi, in his fictional writings creates ‘a substitute life in which’ he ‘can try out solutions to his own crisis’³² is of particular relevance. For, as Freeman writes, ‘narratives [...] rather than being the mere fictions they are sometimes assumed to be, might instead be in the service of attaining exactly those forms of truth that are unavailable in the flux of the immediate’.³³ In other words, this ‘substitute life’ could in fact be a reappraisal by the writer of past reality, which, with time, gains a new meaning and gives new inner resolution to past events. Moreover, if in the genres of direct self-narrative such as autobiographies and memoirs, authors ‘tend to be prescriptive, presenting one’s own life as an example of a moral code in action’,³⁴ in fictional works the author, by hiding behind a hero, can deliberately violate any moral codes and free himself of all ethical bonds. This is the view Shestov took with regard to the literary works he studied, and that is why he was interested above all in this fictional genre rather than in autobiographies, diaries or memoirs *per se*. In other words, while ‘what we might call the moral space of self-interpretation, and thus the space of autobiographical memory itself, remains very much circumscribed’,³⁵ a work of fiction does not carry with it any moral obligations on the part of the author who can reveal himself through his negative characters without any fear of being ‘caught’, of being ‘personally accused’.

³¹ Freeman, 7.

³² Andrew Wachtel, ‘History and autobiography in Tolstoy’ in Donna Tusing Orwin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 188.

³³ Freeman, 224; cited in Cento Bull, 2007, 130.

³⁴ Freeman, 224; cited in Cento Bull, 2007, 130.

³⁵ M. Freeman and J. Brockmeier, ‘Narrative Integrity: Autobiographical identity and the meaning of the “good life”’ in Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (eds.), *Narrative and Identity. Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2001), 85–86; cited in Cento Bull, 2007, 130.

Furthermore, what is of utmost importance in the link between Shestov's approach and narrative psychology is that the latter, as Anna Cento Bull explains, 'is applied mainly to the study of illness narratives, which often deal with personal traumas, focussing on significant moments of change in the life of an individual. [...] Such moments tend to be seen as the beginning of a new journey in one's life, and are often narrated as part of a "conversion genre" which presents numerous points of contact with a religious conversion'.³⁶ As a result, Cento Bull writes, 'our understanding of what constitutes "the truth" can change dramatically'.³⁷ Citing M. L. Crossley, she goes on to point out that we thus revisit our 'conceptions of selfhood and its ultimate connection with issues of morality, "rightness" and "goodness"'.³⁸ The conclusion is that 'in doing so, we create new narratives that help us make sense of life after a trauma'.³⁹

This coincides almost precisely with what Shestov does to the writers he analyses: he searches for a breaking point in their life, for a central crisis – or, in other words, for a defining trauma. Having lived through a traumatic experience himself, he then embarks on a journey through the souls of great thinkers to find in their lives the same trauma-caused re-birth of personality and re-evaluation of old convictions and values – precisely the procedure as outlined above of revisiting our old conceptions of selfhood in relation to morality. It is this new journey on which the doomed individual embarks that most interests Shestov. The old ideals of 'good' are no longer of any use, and a new reality opens up which needs urgent accommodation. Hence Shestov, by reading classical literary works as self-narratives, as attempts to create a self-myth, in a way constructs an alternative myth of the writers' lives centred around a major trauma.

Of course, creating self-myth by means of a literary intervention in one's own life was a hallmark of the then emerging Symbolist movement. Interestingly, however, Shestov cannot be aligned with the Symbolists, even though there is a certain if somewhat reversed affinity between their respective tendencies. More precisely, as Khodasevich points out, the Symbolists' fundamental stance was

³⁶ Cento Bull, 'Political violence, stragismo and "civil war"', forthcoming.

³⁷ Cento Bull, 'Political violence, stragismo and "civil war"', forthcoming.

³⁸ M. L. Crossley, 'Formulating Narrative Psychology: The Limitations of Contemporary Social Constructionalism', *Narrative Inquiry*, vol. 13, No 2 (2003), 297; cited in Cento Bull, 'Political violence', forthcoming.

³⁹ Cento Bull, 'Political violence', forthcoming.

their proclaimed intention to design their own lives as if creating a literary text (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), without separating the individual from the writer.⁴⁰ Shestov, on the other hand, believed that the writer is defined by the man, and that the latter reveals himself through his capacity as the former (that is, his literature is simply a testimony to his existential experience). In other words, the Symbolists believed in the intervention of the writer into the man, while Shestov, on the contrary, saw the man looming behind the writer. Also, while Shestov viewed the interplay between life and the resulting literature as occurring naturally, without any external effort, for the Symbolists their 'life-creation' (the relationship between literature and the 'resulting life') was an invented principle which they strove to implement (with quite disastrous consequences).

Thus Shestov and the Symbolists, although preoccupied by the same phenomenon of the complex union of the man and the writer, viewed it from opposite angles. A much closer analogy can be drawn, quite unexpectedly, between Shestov and Daniil Kharms, who shared a similar, as it were mythological, vision of classical Russian writers. Indeed, in their treatment of these writers, both Shestov and Kharms conformed to a related pattern, whereby they created a mythological man out of a writer who would then become an independent actor in the drama of life. At the same time, Kharms endowed this drama with distinctly caricature and vaudeville-like features, while Shestov had no such intention. However, the effect of his treatment of writers borders in spirit on that of Kharms, although he never crosses the boundary into caricature.. This similarity of approach testifies to the danger inherent in Shestov's method of a too intimate, almost familiar relationship with the personality of the writer under review (a certain lack of 'the pathos of distance',⁴¹ to use Erofeev's words).

In other words, an excessive (and often forced) identification of literature and life leads to a vaudeville of sorts, highlighting the fact that these two spheres are genuinely distinct, that the schism between them is not really bridgeable and that any merging of them is misleading. In particular, as Brodskii puts it, 'in art, owing to the properties of the material itself, it is possible to attain a degree of lyricism that has no physical equivalent in the real world. Nor, in the same way, does there exist in the real world an equivalent of the tragic in art, which (the tragic) is the

⁴⁰ See Vladislav Khodasevich, 'Конец Ренаты', in *Некрополь* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1976), 8–11.

⁴¹ Erofeev, 171.

reverse of lyricism – or the stage that follows it'.⁴² Thus the Symbolists' efforts to create their lives according to literary laws led to farcical results (or at least to tragic results which eventually ended in farce).

In conclusion, it seems clear that Shestov's literary criticism can be understood only in the light of his applied (philosophical) approach to art, and most especially to literature, which stems from his somewhat ambivalent relationship with aesthetics, and with culture as a whole.⁴³ On the one hand, Shestov's thought reflects the perception of the universe that comes from Art, or, if you will, it is the philosophy of artists. This explains why Shestov, while remaining an isolated and relatively obscure figure, is held in such high esteem first and foremost by writers and poets, rather than by philosophers as such. That is why aesthetics is so vital to an understanding of Shestov's creative heritage, because in art it dominates over ethics, in the sense in which form dominates content. Or at least art presumes the inseparable merging of ethics and aesthetics, with the latter having the upper hand. Among the chief characteristics that display the artistic origins and nature of Shestov's philosophizing are his brilliant literary style and his approach to philosophy through literature; his spiritual extremism in rebelling against the world order and standing up for individual existence – for the 'private' against the 'general'.

On the other hand, Shestov's existence on the border between two disciplines, literature and philosophy, is to a large extent responsible for the dialectic struggle of the philosopher and the artist in him, resulting in his aesthetic ambivalence, and has a direct bearing on his achievement as a literary critic. In fact, the words Donald Rayfield wrote in 1971 about Ivanov-Razumnik can be applied with a certain accuracy to Shestov too:

He squeezes his writers like lemons for an attitude to life and throws away the fruit. He does not care to distinguish good and bad writing; he barely touches on his subjects' handling of the word, their aesthetic traditions or the purpose

⁴² Joseph Brodsky, 'Poet and Prose', *Less Than One*, 183.

⁴³ This general theme is elaborated in detail in my paper 'The Treatment of Aesthetics in Lev Shestov's Search for God', in Wil van den Bercken and Jonathan Sutton (eds.), *Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2005), 179–195. Here I quote only in summary.

of art. For him, literature is only a more striking form of philosophical tract.⁴⁴

John Bayley, indeed, wrote in 1970 that ‘great literature for Shestov is [...] a waxwork museum of ideas’ and that ‘as a critic Shestov wastes no time on style or form or literary device’.⁴⁵ Although these claims seemingly imply a total neglect of the aesthetic aspect of literary works, for Shestov an important correction is due: it is only an apparent neglect. In Shestov’s case it is more likely that he ignored aesthetics only superficially; at a deeper level he was as enslaved by it as any artist. To presume otherwise would amount to a contradiction of all the undeniable artistic aspects of Shestov’s creativity, such as his brilliant style, which effectively merges ethics and aesthetics, and the subtext of his writings, which conceals a subtle appreciation of a specifically aesthetic reality. Since I have elaborated on these observations elsewhere,⁴⁶ I shall restrict myself here to suggesting a metaphor which might characterize Shestov’s treatment of aesthetics, one which is, in fact, central for our purposes and develops further the points made above by Rayfield and Bayley: Shestov’s perception of the aesthetic aspect of a literary piece is akin to watching a poet reading out a beautiful poem, but with the sound switched off. That is to say, Shestov witnesses all the apparent passion and temperament of this performance and is inflamed by them, but by them alone. He cannot appreciate the beauty of the text, but he can feel the pathos of it.

This metaphor, in fact, is not entirely precise, because it neglects the fact that Shestov approached literature first of all from a philosophical point of view: he *did* listen to the text very carefully, even if with the sole purpose of extracting its ideas. Therefore a more accurate image would be if we suppose that he can hear the sound, but the poetry is read in a language foreign to him, and he is supplied with a literal translation only. Thus he is still denied the appreciation of its poetic beauty, although he can follow all the philosophical ideas concealed in the text.

Yet, despite a certain conflict between Shestov’s philosophy and aesthetics and culture in general, his (still very timely!) struggle against the dangers of self-assured rationalism encroaching into the irrational domain – a struggle conducted by a combination of philosophical and literary means, with its artistic origin and

⁴⁴ P. D. Rayfield, Introduction to Ivanov-Razumnik, *О смысле жизни* (Letchworth: Bradda Books, 1971), vi.

⁴⁵ Bayley, ‘Idealism and Its Critic’, 6.

⁴⁶ See note 43.

nature – made an invaluable contribution to this very culture. That is why Czeslaw Milosz, comparing Shestov to Brodskii, called both ‘defenders of the Sacred in the age of faithlessness’,⁴⁷ while Viacheslav Ivanov addressed to Shestov the following perceptive words, calling him a raven with dead and living water:

Your unified word is destined, it seems, to sound for eternity; for, if it is impossible to build culture without you, it is equally impossible to build it without you, without your voice, warning against deathly numbness and spiritual vanity.⁴⁸

These words can be taken as an epigraph to the whole creative legacy of Shestov, one of the most literary and most ‘readable’ Russian philosophical writers.

⁴⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, ‘Борьба с удушьем’, in *Иосиф Бродский: Труды и дни* (Moscow: Nezavisimaia Gazeta, 1998), 245.

⁴⁸ Viacheslav Ivanov, letter to Shestov, 10 February 1936; cited in Natalia Baranova-Shestova, *Жизнь Льва Шестова*, 2 vols. (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1983), vol. 1, 146.