LEV SHESTOV AND THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

Roland CLARK
University of Pittsburgh

"*He was ill. ... Darkness surrounded him;*
it had penetrated his soul; and in that darkness,
he sat and wept."
André BELYI, *St Petersburg*, 1912

One of the most unique of the Russian religious philosophers who populated first the salons of St. Petersburg and then the émigré gatherings in Berlin and Paris, Lev Shestov (1866-1938) is also one of the most difficult to force into a strict philosophical system. His friend Berdiaev wrote that Shestov "sought God, he sought the liberation of man from the forces of necessity. [...] The human tragedy, the terrors and suffering of human life, the surviving of hopelessness, were all at the basis of philosophy." Pattison says that "Shestov's entire career is, in effect, a sustained attack on reason and ethics," and Shein that "this all-embracing idea was a passionate desire to liberate man from the tyrannical power of necessity in order to find the truth that is beyond the limits of necessity." Celebrating the irrational and the Absurd in his passionate attacks on Reason, Shestov is most famous for his religious existentialism, where he argued that humanity can live authentically only through radical faith in the Biblical God. Reflecting on the religious themes in Shestov's thought, Zenkovskii noted that "Shestov is essentially a religious thinker; he is not *anthropocentric* but *theocentric*."[1]

I would like to thank Zdenko Zlatar and Garry Trompf for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[1] Nicholas BERDIAEV, "The Fundamental Ideas of the Philosophy of Lev Shestov," in Lev Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation*, trans. Bernard Martin, p. 1 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982); George PATTISON, *Anxious Angels: A Retrospective View of Religious Existentialism*, p. 188 (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999); Louis J. SHEIN, "Lev Shestov: A Russian Existentialist," *The Russian Review* 26 (1967), no. 3, p. 278; V. V. ZENKOVSKY, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, trans. George L. Kline, vol. II, p. 781 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

Zenkovskii's comment is helpful because it acknowledges that, for Shestov, everything flows from one's understanding of God. But it is also misleading. A close examination of Shestov's early career reveals that far from consistently being a *religious* philosopher, as he is usually portrayed, *between 1897 and 1911 Shestov believed God to be dead*, a belief that significantly impacted his anthropology, giving it a Stirnerian flavour, and which caused him to reject both the atheistic Russian Intelligentsia and the Russian religious philosophers, none of whom really appreciated the full implications of deicide. Influenced heavily by Nietzsche's ideas about suffering and the death of God, during this period, Shestov's mental world was close to that of European Modernism as both Shestov and the Modernists were attempting to revision a world of estranged individuals, cut off both from God and from each other. It was not until his works from 1911-14, when he began to meditate on the writings of Martin Luther and Lev Tolstoi that Shestov rediscovered religious faith, and began to articulate religious existentialism proper.

After publishing a number of articles between 1892 and 1898, Shestov wrote his first book, *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*, in 1896-97. In this work Shestov praised Shakespeare for having found "a path in a groundless abyss," holding to ideals as the only sure ballast in a world of chaos. Valevičius argues that in 1897 Shestov still believed in "a sort of teleological expediency (*tseleobraznost*) that governs life ... [and that] there is no such thing as purposeless and meaningless tragedy and there can never be."[2] In his very next work on Tolstoi and Nietzsche (1897-98), Shestov vehemently rejected idealism of all sorts. From 1897 until after 1911, God is effectively dead for Shestov. Shestov's work in this period was an attempt to explicate this realization and to come to terms with a world without God, while never abandoning the search.

Shestov's letters and personal acquaintances between 1897 and 1911 demonstrate that he continued to *act religiously* despite his philosophical agnosticism, and he explains that "on principle man should respect order in the external world and complete chaos in the inner."[3] The fact that he worked for a living and was unable to tell his Jewish father for seventeen years that he had married a gentile demonstrates that he did not always practice the radical faith in the Absurd which he preached. When I speak of Shestov's 'death of God' in the pages that follow, therefore,

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[2] SHESTOV, *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*, (1898); in Andrius VALEVIČUS, *Lev Shestov and His Times*, pp. 10, 18 (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

[3] For examples of Shestov's religious activities, see Nathalie BARANOFF-CHESTOV, *Vie de Léon Chestov*, trans. Blanche Bronstein-Vinaver, vol. I, 76, 106 (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1991); SHESTOV, *All Things are Possible and Penultimate Words and Other Essays*, trans. S. S. Koteliansky I.ix, p. 11 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977).

what is being discussed is Shestov's philosophical position in his published works, and no attempt is made to ascertain his personal spiritual state.

I

In 1920, Shestov wrote in his diary that "this year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of when 'the time fell out of joint,' or more precisely, when an early autumn arrived in the beginning of September."[4] Exactly what caused this crisis is unclear, but it took Shestov all over Europe seeking cures, and probably had personal rather than metaphysical issues at its core. Shestov was able to intellectualize this crisis within a couple of years, projecting his inner turmoil onto the world at large, and finding his own inner biography in the intellectual development of numerous thinkers. According to Shestov, many of the thinkers he studied had sought their security in morality and Reason, only to suddenly discover that ideas could not save. All then violently rejected their heritage, asserting irrationality, chaos and groundlessness against a false understanding of 'the good,' though none were completely successful or consistent in their existential stance. One of the first thinkers with whom Shestov discovered this affinity was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). His disciple, Benjamin Fondane tells us that when Shestov discovered Nietzsche, he "left the house of the wise slamming the door behind him. Now he understood that morality, instead of helping us attain freedom and truth, was really causing our division amongst ourselves, our subjection and our destruction and that by consequence, one must no longer try to set time right."[5] Shestov records that when he first read Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* in 1894,

> I began reading at eight o'clock in the evening and did not finish until two o'clock in the morning. It left me in jitters, devastated, I could not sleep. I searched for ways in which I could opposed Nietzsche's horrible thought, cruel thought. ... Of course nature was severe, indifferent ... But thought was not nature; there was no reason why it should want to kill the weak, drive them to the edge. Why assist nature in its dreadful task? I lost my head. ... At the time I knew nothing of Nietzsche, I knew nothing about his life. Then one day, I believe it was in the Brokhaus, I read a small biography. Nietzsche was one of those people with whom nature had

[4] SHESTOV, quoted in BARANOFF-CHESTOV, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
[5] Benjamin FONDANE, "Chestov. Témoin à la charge," *La Conscience malheureuse,* quoted in *ibid*., p. 67.

> come to terms brutally, relentlessly. Nature found him weak and pushed him. On that day I understood.[6]

Shestov insists that he never prostrated himself before Nietzsche, but he did take from him certain very important concepts, the most significant being that of the death of God and its partner, 'beyond good and evil.' As he makes clear in the above quote, Nietzsche was important to Shestov not because of his irrationality but rather because his philosophical insights are founded in suffering, in an 'authentic' understanding of existence. Prior to Nietzsche, suffering was considered to be negative, unnatural, and something to be overcome. Idealism seeks to elevate Truth and Beauty to the extent that "severe, indifferent" nature is completely excluded. Forcing obedience to morality, Idealism destroys the individual ego and thus "overcomes" the self, denying its autonomy as egos are subordinated to a higher truth. Life is denied in order that redemption might be believable, and it is also minimized so that the suffering inherent in life itself might be minimized, or even abolished. Opposing this view, Nietzsche identified suffering with Life herself, and for him suffering is deifying and generative, as it is within Greek tragedy: "Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it is eternally reborn and comes back from destruction." The solution of Idealism was impossible, Nietzsche argued, because he could not outrun his shadow and erase the past sufferings to which he owed his existence – the recognition of a debt is itself a cause of suffering.[7]

Nietzsche denies sufferers the comfort of knowing that their suffering achieves something, rendering it teleologically meaningless. The world becomes "a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back ...[a] Dionysian world of eternally self-creating, eternally self-destroying ... without goal, unless the

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[6] SHESTOV, 21 Jan, 1938; in Benjamin FONDANE, 'Rencontres avec Léon Chestov,' *Mercure de France* no. 351, 1964, pp. 204-205.

[7] Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith, II.19, III.10 III.17, pp. 69, 94, 109 (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. and ed., I.5, I.9, IV.9, pp. 149, 156, 384 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971); Friedrich NIETZSCHE, "Notes (1888)," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 1052, p. 459 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971); *The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem*, [1888], in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wager*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. & ed., p. 191 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); Martin HEIDEGGER, *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell, II.8, p. 48 (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

joy of the circle is itself a goal."[8] Here suffering is the fundamental human lot, and becomes worthwhile because existence itself is of value. Rostenne says that "if, at one point, Shestov was able to believe that social reforms would one day triumph over human misfortune," Nietzsche "revealed a human misfortune which could not be remedied by any kind of social reform that was interested in material poverty and intellectual ignorance."[9]

Nietzsche argues that suffering has value once it is incorporated into one's very being, as happened to Zarathustra during his convalescence. When "we violate ourselves, ... we are bound to grow day-by-day more questionable, *worthier* of asking questions; perhaps also worthier – of living?"[10] The procreative value of suffering is why Nietzsche can claim to be "infinitely more indebted" to his long illness than to his health, because "I owe to it a higher health, one such that it grows stronger than everything that it does not destroy. I also owe to it my philosophy."[11] The achievement of *naïveté* is not possible without first removing the 'veil of *māyā*' – an action that itself involves suffering.[12] It is only through complete hopelessness that one is able to achieve true self-consciousness by ceasing to rely on anything or anyone else. Shestov was later to equate this action with the receiving of "a new pair of eyes" from the Angel of Death. He said, "then one sees strange and new things, more than other men see and more than he himself sees with his natural eyes," and argued this view of tragedy against Brandes in his first book, *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*.[13] In taking this position, Nietzsche

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[8] NIETZSCHE, *Will to Power*, p. 1067; quoted in Charles E. SCOTT, *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger*, pp. 27-28 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[9] Paul ROSTENNE, *Léon Chestov*, 1967; quoted in VALEVIČUS, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

[10] NIETZSCHE, *Genealogy*; quoted in Tyler T. ROBERTS, "'This Art of Transfiguration *Is* Philosophy': Nietzsche's Asceticism," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996), no. 3, p. 421.

[11] NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, Preface to the Second Edition, 3; quoted in SHESTOV, "Tolstoy and Nietzsche," *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, trans. Bernard Martin, p. 78 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969).

[12] *Naïveté* is a Schillerian term used to describe "the oneness of man with nature." The 'veil of *māyā*' is Schopenhauer's term for the perception of reality that "separated individuals and cognized the unity of the metaphysical will." NIETZSCHE, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. and ed., p. 43 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); David E. CARTWRIGHT, "The Last Temptation of Zarathustra," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993), no. 1, p. 55.

[13] SHESTOV, "The Conquest of Self-Evidences: Dostoievsky's Philosophy," *In Job's Balances: On the Sources of Eternal Truths*, trans. Camilla Coventry and C. A. Macartney, p. 5 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975); Bernice Glatzer

is opposing himself completely to modernity, as he purchases pleasure and knowledge at the price of suffering – a transaction that was the complete antithesis of everything that his mentor, Schopenhauer, taught.[14]

Against modernity's linear view of history and progress Nietzsche opposes "eternal return". This is the thought that "you will have to live this life ... once again and countless times more; and there will be nothing new to it, but every pain and every pleasure, every thought and sigh, and everything unutterably petty or grand in your life will have to come back to you, all in the same sequence and order."[15] As Lampert notes, "to affirm eternal return is to construe both time and being in ways inimical to modernity's understanding of them and to overcome its revenge against time and being."[16] It explodes not only modernity, but metaphysics itself, forcing one back into the chaotic world of the pre-Socratics, in particular that of Heraclitus, where "the ordering, the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire everliving, kindled in measures and in measures going out," and where "the beginning and end are shared in the circumference of a circle."[17]

This explosion of Idealism is what Nietzsche means by the 'death of God', which he proclaimed loudly and violently. Modernity had replaced the Biblical God with Reason, and now Nietzsche claims that this new, rational deity is also dead. Shestov explains that "the 'good,' 'fraternal love' – the experience of Nietzsche has taught us – is not God. ... Nietzsche has shown us the way. We must seek that which is *higher* than compassion, *higher* than the 'good'; we must seek God."[18] The conclusion that Shestov does not draw from this – a conclusion foundational for Nietzsche's ethics – is that in a world "beyond good and evil" the strong, having endured suffering and conquered, have the right

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ROSENTHAL, "Shestov, Lev," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward CRAIG ed., vol. VIII, p. 742 (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

[14] SHESTOV, "Dostoevksy and Nietzsche" *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, p. 315.

[15] NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, IV, 341, p. 101 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971).

[16] Laurence LAMPERT, *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 276 (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986).

[17] NIETZSCHE, *Zarathustra*, III.2.ii, pp. 270-271; Heraclitus, "Fragment XXXVII," and "Fragment XCIX," in Charles H. KAHN, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary*, pp. 45, 75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[18] SHESTOV, "Tolstoy and Nietzsche," *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, p. 140. His italics.

to ignore the weak and to trample them underfoot.[19] Shestov claims that the ideal of the *Übermensch* was foreign to Nietzsche's true character as well.[20] As Gal'tseva notes, Shestov's "hero was not the master and creator but the 'drowning man,' the 'living dead,' who had been abandoned and forgotten by idealist philosophers,"[21] but Shestov criticized pity without effective action, crying "woe to him who has nothing to offer but compassion."[22] God was no longer compassion or 'the good', and consequently He had been completely lost.

The God that Shestov is left with is almost that described by Paul Tillich in his discussion of 'absolute faith': "Theism in all its forms is transcended in the experience we have called absolute faith. It is the accepting of the acceptance without somebody or something that accepts. ... It transcends both mysticism and personal encounter."[23] Like Tillich, Shestov writes that "the ultimate truths are absolutely unintelligible," but then qualifies it by saying, "unintelligible ...but not inaccessible."[24] Prior to 1911 Shestov believed, with Nietzsche, that truth could be accessed by extraordinary individuals through tragedy, by those who did not suffer from giddiness when ascending the alpine summits.[25]

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[19] NIETZSCHE, *Zarathustra*, I.22, p. 187; *Genealogy of Morals*, III.14, pp. 101-103; *Twilight of the Idols or, How one philosophizes with a hammer*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, IX.20, p. 526 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971).

[20] SHESTOV, "Tolstoy and Nietzsche," *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche,* p. 120.

[21] Zakydalsky, paraphrase of Renata GAL'TSEVA, *Ocherki russkoi utopicheskoi mysli XX veka*, 1992; in Taras D. ZAKYDALSKY, "Lev Shestov and the Revival of Religious Thought in Russia," in *Russian Thought After Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage*, James P. SCANLAN ed., p. 159 (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994.

[22] SHESTOV, *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes,* 1896-97; quoted in Sidney MONAS, "Introduction," in SHESTOV, *Chekhov and Other Essays*, trans. Sidney Monas, p. xvii (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1966).

[23] Paul TILLICH, *The Courage to Be*, pp. 185-6 (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1952). Note that while Shestov affirms this aspect of Tillich's understanding of God, Tillich's other ideas about 'nonbeing', 'estrangement' and 'anxiety' are not part of Shestov's mental world.

[24] Lev SHESTOV, *All Things are Possible*; quoted in José R. MAIA NETO, *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism: Scepticism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Shestov*, p. 93 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).

[25] Lev SHESTOV, *All Things are Possible*, II.xl, p. 112.

II

While the majority of society remained subservient to Idealism, the extremely heterogeneous artistic and literary movement known today as 'Modernism' can be seen as *a revolt against this apathy in the face of the death of God, and an attempt to revision the world in light of this fact,* and for this reason Shestov's agenda is synonymous with that of Modernism. Modernism sought to replace their own culture's logic, which had relied upon the concept of a rational God, with their own logic, which had its origin in the loss God. The nineteenth century had tolerated God's death because the Romantics still felt Him in the natural world, but rapidly increasing urbanization denied their children these natural hierophanies. Cityscapes and interior scenes dominated the work of such artists as Mariia Bashkirtseva even in the 1880s, crowding out the natural landscapes of Romantic art. Nature in the work of the poet Marina Tsetaeva is 'anti-Edenic' – a place of toil and sin rather than beatitude.[26] The morality enshrined in traditional jurisprudence, too, had been replaced by humanistic and utilitarian theories promoting "the greatest good for the greatest number," no longer relying upon 'groundless' moral imperatives. As Ivan Karamazov put it: "If there is no God, everything is permissible."[27]

For the Modernists the loss of God, who in modernity had provided the lynchpin by which true and rational knowledge was possible,[28] was a truly momentous event. They were desperately trying to revision a cosmos that had lost its centre. As E. M. Forster wrote, "things won't fit."[29] A close friend of Shestov said that "for some reason there is something broken within him."[30] The Modernists' chaos placed them at odds with their societies at large, which, despite widespread agnosticism in practice if not profession, stubbornly persisted in living as though the world had not fundamentally changed. Mythological meta-narratives such as the idea of progress still dominated historical and scientific discourses,

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[26] Pamela CHESTER, "Painted mirrors: landscape and self-representation in Russian women's verbal and visual art," in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts*, Catriona KELLY and Stephen LOVELL eds., pp. 286-293 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[27] Ivan Karamazov, in Feodor DOSTOEVSKII, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, vol. 1, II.vi, pp. 65-66 (London: Heron Books, 1967).

[28] René DESCARTES, "Discourse on the Method of Properly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences," in *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. E. Stucliffe, IV, p. 58 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979).

[29] E. M. FORSTER, *A Room With A View*, p. 39 (Bath: Penguin Books, 1995).

[30] Evgeniya Guertsyg, quoted in VALEVIČUS, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

morality was still considered 'right', and people still felt a sense of belonging, not only to their imagined communities, but also to their allotted position within the medieval Chain of Being. Modernist philosophers, writers and artists therefore went to extremes to convey that the times were out of joint, not only in their art, but also in their outrageous lifestyles. Characters as varied as Dali and Mayakovskii created public spectacles simply to distance themselves from stifling convention.

In Modernist representation, "all boundaries fade away and the world reveals itself for the mad slaughterhouse that it is."[31] Grammar was tied to God, and with His death existing forms of communication become unsatisfactory, anachronisms from a bygone era that must be abandoned as the Modernists searched for new interpretive and expressive models.[32] Shestov claimed that "our thought becomes false when we clothe it in words not so much because we do not find adequate expression for it but, above all, because we do not dare show it to others in the form under which it was originally revealed to us,"[33] and rather than calling for the destruction of language or the imposition of new forms of representation, as other Modernists did, he simply asked for *truthfulness* in communication. According to the Modernists, chaos characterizes social relations, production and commerce, religious establishments, and is reflected most of all in music and art. From the scattered and unpredictable crescendos of Stravinsky's *Le Sacré du Printemps*, to the disjointed word patterns of Dada or Futurism, chaos dominates, encroaching upon the freedom of the artist and their ability to represent reality.

Loss of religious faith and the quest of the individual to find new discourses to replace those of idealism comprise the dominant themes of James Joyce's 1916 masterpiece, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. At this time European society was dominated by humanism and a belief in progress. Europeans exercised unprecedented levels of control over their environment and over other cultures both collectively and individually. Kolb describes the 'modern individual' as "a perceiving, choosing being potentially free to maximize whatever is desired."[34] No longer bound by any necessary religious or ethical laws, Stephen Dedalus,

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[31] Henry MILLER, *Tropic of Cancer*, p. 177 (London: Flamingo, 1993).
[32] NIETZSCHE, *Twilight*, III.5, p. 483; Douwe FOKKEMA & Elrud IBSCH, *Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940*, pp. 13-14 (London: C Hurst, 1987).
[33] Lev SHESTOV, "Thoughts Expressed and Not Expressed," *Potestas Clavium*, trans. Bernard Martin, p. 92 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968).
[34] David KOLB, *The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After*, p. 6 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Joyce's hero, makes his own way in the world without submitting to any body or doctrine. In this – though perhaps in little else – Dedalus greatly resembles Dostoevskii's Underground Man, who preaches 'whim', and demands "the right to use it whenever I want to," revolting against traditional behavioral mores despite being tempted by their capacity to yield power. Neither of these heroes is comfortable in their freedom, however, the Underground Man admitting that he has "lost the habit of *living*."[35] Later, Henry Miller declared that in his freedom he was "*inhuman*," having "nothing to do with the creaking machinery of humanity."[36] Both Dedalus and the Underground Man therefore seek religious transcendence to redeem them from their lot,[37] but as God is dead, He cannot rescue them from their alienation.

Other Modernist heroes such as J.-K. Huysmans' Durtal search for the lost supernatural elsewhere, but after committing sacrilege, Durtal emerges from his Black Mass disgusted and furious both with himself and with his lover.[38] While isolated individuals, such as T. S. Eliot, emerge from the chaos into religious belief, adogmatism remains the trademark of the Modernist movement, any absolutes being regarded with deep mistrust.[39] Shestov reacted violently against Berdiaev's suggestion that he was therefore a skeptic, because, he says, "skeptics are those who are persuaded that there is nothing to be searched for given that nothing will ever be found. ... [I am not favourable to] skepticism but to a flexible adogmatic dogmatism."[40] In this he was akin to many Modernists who, to

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[35] Underground Man, in Feodor DOSTOEVSKII, *Notes from Underground*, in DOSTOEVSKII, *Dostoyevsky*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew, I.x, II.x, pp. 118, 199 (New York: New American Library, New York, 1961).

[36] MILLER, *Cancer*, p. 247.

[37] James JOYCE, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 165 (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992). The original manuscript of *Notes from Underground* concluded "from all this the need for faith and Christ," though this was edited out by the censors (Fyodor Dostoevskii, letter to Mikhail Dostoevskii, March 26, 1864; quoted in Robert Louis JACKSON, *Dostoevsky's Underground Man in Russian Literature*, pp. 27-28 (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1958). The proffered and lost salvation is still visible in the extant work in Liza's offer of communion to the hero in II.x, p. 199, for Dostoevskii's salvation is essentially found in *sobornost'*. On this question, see Marina KOSTALEVSKY, *Dostoevsky and Soloviev: The Art of Integral Vision*, p. 32 (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997).

[38] Joris-Karl HUYSMANS, *The Damned (Là-Bas)*, trans. Terry Hale, p. 230 (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

[39] FOKKEMA & IBSCH, *op. cit.*, 4; Michael HOLLINGTON, "Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time," in *Modernism 1890-1930*, M. BRADBURY and J. MCFARLANE eds., p. 432 (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

[40] SHESTOV, *Les commencements et les fins*, quoted in MAIA NETO, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

use Heller's metaphor, keep a chair vacant for the Messiah, not knowing if he will ever come and rejecting any would-be occupant as a pretender.[41]

Losing the naturalistic utopia reflected in eighteenth century architecture, the late nineteenth century "was left with the *utopia of form* as a way of recovering the human totality through an ideal synthesis, as a way of embracing disorder through order."[42] As Berdiaev argued, "human powers that escape from a state of organism inevitably become enslaved to mechanization," and union with machines separates people from communion with each other.[43] Humans were boxed into their environment and had to find life *within themselves* rather than looking upward for salvation, searching for what Clark calls "a kind of profane illumination."[44] In Belyi's *St Petersburg* the city envelops the characters, who appear and disappear out of the fog at random, trapped within its dark, narrow streets and its civic traditions of rebellion and patricide.[45] The 'modern' novelist, Tolstoi, "was most thoroughly at home in a city when it was being burnt down,"[46] but for the Modernists the city is their natural environment.

In the Modernist novel, in a rapidly changing technological world, characters no longer remain static, but become themselves "provisional and corrigible hypotheses" – poor soil to ground salvation in, though this unstable self remains the sole point of reference for the individual.[47] Unlike the religious paradises promised by other religious philosophers, Shestov's salvation is this-worldly, and he repeatedly emphasizes its impossible nature. Despite Kierkegaard's fideistic philosophy, Shestov notes that "he cannot make the 'movement of faith,' cannot stir even a limb; it is as if he were bewitched and his will paralyzed, or, as he himself said, in a swoon." In his later thought, it is

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[41] Agnes HELLER, *A Theory of Modernity*, pp. 11-12 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).
[42] Manfredo TAFURI, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta, p. 48 (Cambridge, MA, & London: MIT Press, 1976).
[43] Nicholas BERDIAEV, *The End of Our Time*, trans. Donald Attwater, p. 41 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933); Marshall BERMAN, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, p. 26 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).
[44] Katerina CLARK, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, p. 30 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
[45] BERMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 257.
[46] George STEINER, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism*, p. 198 (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).
[47] FOKKEMA & IBSCH, *op. cit.*, p. 39; KOLB, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

precisely this impossibility that makes existentialism the best philosophy, because "miracles alone can save man."[48]

The modern city is the product of social planning and 'scientific' thought, architects becoming hegemons of the modern city's aesthetics. A characteristic of the modern age is the reduction of knowledge to technical understanding, with the desacralisation of nature as its necessary corollary.[49] Technical thought is always cognitive rather than emotional, and the highly educated Modernists always privileged the head over the heart. Shestov bemoans that fact that in the 'savages,' Herbert Spencer

> sees a barbarity, as an educated European should. I also see in them barbarity, because I also am a European and have a scientific education. But I deeply envy their barbarity, and curse the cultivation which has herded me together with believing missionaries, idealist, materialist, and positivist philosophers, into the narrow fold of the sultry and disgusting world. We may write books to prove the immortality of the soul, but our wives won't follow us into the other world....[50]

Reason could no longer satisfy, and disturbs rather than comforts the modern thinker, who must nonetheless continue thinking in order to remain 'authentic'. Chekhov's Nikitin "felt as though his head were immense and empty as a barn, and that new, peculiar thoughts were wandering about in it like tall shadows."[51] Belyi links a loss of rational laws and absolute truths to "primordial darkness," in which his hero is lost.[52] Reason is forever critical, never able to rest on any certain truths, and uncertain even of its own legitimacy, as rational inquiry requires freedom, and "freedom grounds nothing."[53]

Mental illness is thus a recurrent theme of modernity, indeed, modernity can only be properly revealed through madness, for rationality

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[48] SHESTOV, *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, trans. Elinor Hewitt, p. 212 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969); SHESTOV, *Sola fide: Luther et l'église*, trans. Sophie Sève, p. 58 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957).

[49] CLARK, *op. cit.*, 62-63; Paul BROCKELMAN, *The Inside Story: A Narrative Approach to Religious Understanding and Truth*, pp. 34, 36 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

[50] FOKKEMA & IBSCH, *op. cit.*, p. 43; SHESTOV, "Penultimate Words," *Chekhov*, p. 87.

[51] Anton CHEKHOV, "The Teacher of Literature," in CHEKHOV, *Stories*, trans. Constance Garnett, vol. I, p. 270 (Geneva: Heron Books, 1968).

[52] André BELYI, *St Petersburg*, trans. John Cournos, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960, p. 106.

[53] HELLER, *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 14.

requires consistency, and consistency is not freedom.[54] Kovrin, in Chekhov's 'Black Monk', is driven insane by his own genius, and Nietzsche, Weber, Shestov and Nijinsky all suffer nervous breakdowns. Many of Belyi's characters suffer "brain fatigue and pseud-hallucinations." As Berman observes, "the freedom it [modernity] confers is the freedom of a beautifully formed, perfectly sealed tomb."[55] This is also the period that witnessed the rise of the psycho-analysis of neurosis.

As noted earlier, the idea of progress dominated modern society, though that progress now relied, not on God, but on humans alone. Essentially a secularization of the old Christian view of history, modern thinkers saw the present as a transitory stage in a process of either linear or dialectical development, but always with the past subordinated to the future, and with the *telos* being of supreme importance.[56] The chaos and destruction of World War One also rendered the idea of progress less credible, Modernist writers rejecting linear understandings of time, experimenting with cyclical models, fragmentary time, or with the reassertion of barbarism.[57] Once again, as the world around them crumbles, *individuals* become the only centre, and Modernism becomes "the quest for the pure, self-referential art object."[58]

Individualism was not an established fact at the turn of the twentieth century, however, and was something that many Modernists had to fight for, asserting the will of the individual against the mediocrity of the 'herd'. Balmont writes that "I hate mankind, I flee from it in haste. My one home is my deserted soul."[59] Shestov felt exactly the same way. He writes that "since, sooner or later, every individual is doomed to

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[54] Michel FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard, p. 288 (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); KOLB, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[55] Anton CHEKHOV, "The Black Monk," in CHEKHOV, *The Duel and Other Stories*, trans. Ronald Wilks, p. 222 (London: Penguin Books, 1985); BELYI, *op. cit.*, p. 260; BERMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[56] David BEBBINGTON, *Patterns in History*, p. 68 (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979); HELLER, *op. cit.*, 7; Alexandre KOJÈVE, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Allan BLOOM ed., trans. James H Nichols, Jnr, pp. 156-160 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[57] Henry MILLER, *Tropic of Capricorn*, pp. 297-301 (Paris: The Obelisk Press, 1957); HOLLINGTON, *op. cit.*, p. 440; SHESTOV, "Destroying and Building," *Potestas Clavium*, pp. 39-42; André BÉDARD, *La nuit libératrice: Liberté, raison et foi selon L. Chestov*, p. 50 (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1973); CLARK, *op. cit.*, p. 46; BELYI, *op. cit.*, p. 225; BERDIAEV, *End of our Time*, p. 57.

[58] BERMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[59] Balmont, quoted in Eugene LAMPERT, "Modernism in Russia 1893-1917," in *Modernism 1890-1930*, M. BRADBURY and J. MCFARLANE, eds., p. 150 (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

irremediable unhappiness, *the last word of philosophy is loneliness.*"[60] Therefore Modernism became a very elitist movement, and one that saw itself as radically different from surrounding society. André Gide wrote that being "in disagreement with one's times – that is what justifies being an artist."[61] God was dead, but in society,

> The works proceed until run down; although
> Bereft of purpose, void of use, still go.[62]

The shock tactics and radical nature of many Modernist works can be seen as a desperate attempt to alert the masses to the nihilism that was engulfing their lives. Creative activity had lost its meaning and had become simple commercialization – art was reduced to a saleable commodity. Mainstream society was bankrupt and devoid of value in their eyes, so the Modernists searched for meaning in the extraordinary rather than the average, in the improbable rather than the likely, and looked for dissonance rather than melody in art and life, though they might yearn for naïve normality.[63] Viktor Shklovskii's distinction between 'seeing' and 'recognizing' is helpful here, as not only the Formalists, but all Modernists strove to help people to 'see' objects that they would otherwise glance over. Schklovskii hoped to achieve his goal by the "making strange" or the "defamiliarization" of mundane objects, forcing the reappraisal of the everyday in light of the new, modern reality that God was dead.[64]

III

Shestov's mental world was almost identical to that of European Modernism, but did he see himself and did others see him as a Modernist?

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[60] SHESTOV, *All Things are Possible*, I.liii, p. 33.
[61] Quoted in FOKKEMA and IBSCH, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[62] James THOMSON, *City of Dreadful Night*; quoted in G. M. HYDE, 'The Poetry of the City,' in *Modernism 1890-1930*, M. BRADBURY and J. MCFARLANE eds., p. 345 (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
[63] SHESTOV, *Kierkegaard*, pp. 54-55; TAFURI, *op. cit.*, p. 96; Catriona KELLY, "Painting and autobiography: Anna Prismanov's 'Pesok' and Anna Akhmatov's 'Epicheskie motivy'," in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts*, Catriona KELLY and Stephen LOVELL eds., p. 59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Stephen C. HUTCHINGS, *Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday*, p. 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[64] Viktor SHKLOVSKII, "Art as Technique," quoted in CLARK, *op. cit.*, p. 32. Cf. Clark's discussion of the 'Hermes complex' in *ibid*., pp. 20-21.

Kuvakin argues that "they considered him to be one of 'theirs' in God-seeking and decadent circles" in Russia itself, though she expresses reservations about whether Shestov really 'fitted in' to these circles.[65] Although Shestov maintained close friendships with Berdiaev, Bulgakov, Remizov, Belyi and Rozanov, and frequented Ivanov's 'Tower',[66] he did not find kindred spirits amongst either the Russian religious philosophers or the Russian Symbolists,[67] as both dealt with metaphysical conceptions that Shestov could not accept, but this does not rule out the possibility that Shestov had commonalities with the non-religious Modernists both in Russia and abroad. When Symbolism and Modernism are viewed in light of their religious leanings, it becomes clear that Blok was correct in seeing Symbolism as the *opposite* of "the poison of Modernism," – not as its ally.[68]

The poet Minski, at least, saw clear resemblances between Shestov and the Modernist trend in the arts: "These days, when painters reject pattern and perspective, composers, melody and harmony, poets, measure and rhyme, why not have a philosopher deny reason?"[69] In 1901 Serge Diaghilev sought Shestov as an editor for *Mir Isskusstva* (*The World of Art*) a journal he had founded two years earlier – a post that Shestov did not take up, though several of his reviews were published here – and Diaghilev assisted Shestov in his research on Chekhov.[70] Ergé records that "amongst us, at school [in 1906], he had a circle who made a true cult of that writer."[71] Shestov clearly appealed far more to the younger generation than to the writers of the Silver Age, many of whom

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[65] Valery A. KUVAKIN, 'Lev Shestov,' in *A History of Russian Philosophy: From the Tenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, Valery A. KUVAKIN ed., vol. II, p. 616 (New York: Prometheus Books, New York).

[66] BARANOFF-CHESTOV, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-114, 152f, 164f, 177-178, 184.

[67] By the 'Russian Symbolists' I am primarily referring here to those whom West labels as 'second generation' Symbolists, i.e., to those betraying a significant debt to Vladimir Soloviev. West rightly divides Symbolism "into an earlier, 'decadent' group, headed by Bryusov and Bal'mont, in which the influence of French and Belgian symbolism is paramount, and a second generation, whose leading representatives were Ivanov, Bely, and Blok, characterized by a more religious and philosophical bent." James WEST, *Russian Symbolism: A Study of Vyacheslav Ivanov and the Russian Symbolist Aesthetic*, p. 2 (London: Methuen and Co., 1970).

[68] Wladimir Weidlé, "The Poison of Modernism," trans. H. W. Tjalsma, in *Russian Modernism: Culture and the Avant-Garde, 1900-1930*, George Gibian and H. W. Tjalsma eds., p. 18 (London: Cornell University Press, 1976).

[69] Minski, quoted in BARANOFF-CHESTOV, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

[70] *Ibid*., pp. 63-69.

[71] Ergé, quoted in *ibid*., pp. 88-89.

found him confusing and irrelevant, Filozofov and Merezkhovskii making a public declaration in 1909 that Shestov was poisoning the Russian youth and was extremely dangerous, labeling him a wolf in sheep's clothing.[72] Viacheslav Ivanov wrote to Shestov that "if it's not possible to build culture with you, it's not possible to build it without you, without your voice which puts on guard death and spiritual glory. You resemble a raven with the water of death and life."[73]

Whether or not Shestov agreed with the dominant artistic trends, he always contributed to the Modernist journals.[74] He also continued to meet with Russian writers after the war, indulging in long philosophical discussions with Lundberg, Ehrenberg and Belyi in Berlin during the early 1920s. In Paris, Shestov published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and *Mercure de France*, and both André Gide and Charles Du Bos spoke very highly of him. Together with Paul Desjardin they invited Shestov to Potigny in August 1923, where he associated with A. M. Schmidt, Jean Tardieu and Roger Martin du Gard amongst others.[75]

D. H. Lawrence also felt an affinity with Shestov, writing a forward to the 1920 English edition of *All Things are Possible*. Lawrence wrote that Shestov's book "is not nihilism. It is the shaking free of the human psyche of the old bonds. The positive central cry idea is that the human psyche, or soul, really believes in itself, and in nothing else."[76] This may not be true to Shestov's later work but it is possibly the most penetrating contemporary assessment of Shestov's anthropology at the time that *All Things are Possible* was written. Learning from Nietzsche that God was dead, and that therefore there could be no idea of progress, no meaning in suffering, and no reference outside of the self, between 1897 and 1911 Shestov sought to understand how live as an individual – as an egoist. This stance brought him into contact, both intellectually and personally, with many of the leading figures of European Modernism because his pessimistic worldview found so many similarities with their own.

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[72] *Ibid*., pp. 120-121.
[73] Ivanov to Shestov, 10 Feb 1936, Rome; quoted in *ibid*., p. 170.
[74] Including *Kievskoe Slovo*, *Zhizn i Isskustvo*, *Voprosy Zhizni*, *Polyarnay Zvezda*, *Russkaya Mysl'*, DIAGHILEV's *Mir Isskusstva*, MEREZKHOVSKII's *Novy Put'*, and the émigré journal *Sovremenn'ie Zapiski*. Louis J. SHEIN, *The Philosophy of Lev Shestov (1866-1938): A Russian Religious Existentialist*, pp. iii-vii (Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991); BARANOFF-CHESTOV, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 72, 215.
[75] BARANOFF-CHESTOV, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-272, 290, 295.
[76] D. H. LAWRENCE, "Forward," in Lev SHESTOV, *All Things are Possible and Penultimate Words and Other Essays*, p. 4 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977).