‘Marina G. Ogden offers a competitive and comprehensive look at the prominent Russian thinker Lev Shestov. This valuable book, based on archival sources, provides good historical background for Shestov’s investigations, which is very important for a better understanding not only Russian religious thought but also Western philosophy of the twentieth century.’

– Professor Teresa Obolevitch, The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Krakow

‘The pioneering Russian existentialist Lev Shestov influenced Camus, Bataille, Celan and many others. In this absorbing study, Marina G. Ogden shows how his “parable” of the many-eyed Angel of Death anticipates much recent thinking about trauma and its effects in setting a life on a unique and sometimes creative path.’

– David M. Black, the author of Why Things Matter: The Place of Values in Science, Psychoanalysis and Religion

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Russian émigré philosopher Lev Shestov (1866–1938) challenged traditional philosophical norms and brought the individual experience of the anxiety of death to the forefront of philosophical investigation. Based on new research and translations of Shestov’s unpublished manuscripts, notes and correspondence, this book analyses the thoughts of one of the most influential thinkers of the past century in an interdisciplinary context. While uncovering the roots of the philosopher’s existential position, the author traces Shestov’s ‘wandering through souls’ of the world’s most significant philosophers and writers within the context of a historical and biographical narrative, offering a close reading of his thinking in its chronological progression. A new interpretation of Shestov’s philosophy, this comparative and hermeneutical analysis focuses on the thinker’s continual search for meaning on the question of human mortality. Bringing together up-to-date research findings in Russian, English and French, an evolutionary analysis of the key notions in Shestov’s philosophy – the problems of truth, revelation, faith and death – is carried out in conjunction with the ideas of such pivotal figures in Western culture as Fyodor Dostoevsky, William James, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber and Sigmund Freud.

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, Marina G. Ogden holds a BA in Humanities from St Petersburg’s Herzen University (the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia), an MRes in Art Theory and Philosophy from Central Saint Martins UAL and a PhD in Modern Languages and Cultures from the University of Glasgow. A Research Affiliate in Theology and Religious Studies at the School of Critical Studies of the University of Glasgow, a Research Assistant at The Lev Shestov Studies Society and an award-winning artist, she is an interdisciplinary researcher, specializing in the philosophy of Lev Shestov and nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian and European philosophy and culture. She has published articles, given interviews and created artwork on the subjects of philosophy and art, Lev Shestov, R. G. Collingwood, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard and Sigmund Freud.
Lev Shestov’s Angel of Death
Memory, Trauma and Rebirth

Marina G. Ogden
For Cora Gabriella
Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us.


We must make use of everything, even of death, to serve the ends of this life of ours.


Which is the dream – God, or the world that denies Him?

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When Lev Shestov’s collection of aphorisms, *All Things are Possible*, was first published in English translation in 1920, it had the effect of a spiritual meteorite coming from a far-away land which had only recently ‘been inoculated with the virus of European culture and ethic’. What for Europeans seemed ‘organically inevitable’ because it belonged to the ‘very blood and bones, the very nerve and root of our psyche’, according to D. H. Lawrence’s preface, remained alien to the Russians, for whom the process of modernization which started under Peter the Great produced an inner struggle similar to the reaction of an organism fighting a disease. However shocking or prophetic these remarks may seem to contemporary audiences they aptly capture the impression of radical alterity which Shestov’s writing provoked in Western intellectual circles, coming as it were in the wake of two defining moments in the twentieth century: the First World War and the Russian Bolshevik revolution.

In trying to define the Russian specificity, D. H. Lawrence mentions its assimilation of European culture as a ‘rootless’ import. Besides the reference to the original title of Shestov’s volume, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, this remark takes its cue from the provocative portrayal of the Russian as the noble, yet naïve savage as contrasted to his savvier, civilized European counterpart. ‘Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tartar […] To us in Russia, civilisation came suddenly, while we were still savages,’ affirms Shestov in the apodictic fashion of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. The rallying call for a new genealogy of thinkers, ‘homeless adventurers, born nomads, to whom *ubi bene ibi patria*’ hasn’t escaped the attention of both English

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3 Shestov, *All Things Are Possible*, 38.
and French commentators, for whom Shestov became the prow figure of ‘nomad thought’ and of the ‘thought from outside’. Following a period of relative neglect after his death in 1938, his work was rediscovered during the 1960s by some of the most influential postmodern philosophers (among whom Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari), and began to be associated with a non-systematic philosophical undercurrent running from Tertullian to Pascal, and from Nietzsche and Dostoevsky to Kierkegaard, Kafka and Blanchot among others. The retrospective exhibition and the events dedicated to the 150th anniversary of Shestov’s birthday in 2016, highlighted the contemporary legacy of an author whose radical alterity epitomized the persistence of ‘nomad thought’, of a thought from outside the positivity of our scientific knowledge and the boundaries of the Western rationalist philosophical tradition. From Deleuze’s remarks on ‘the underground man’ in *Difference and Repetition*, to Deleuze and Guattari’s later argument about the ‘private thinkers’ in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Shestov’s paradoxical type of reasoning, which aimed at breaking the logical continuity of argument and ‘bringing man out on the shoreless sea of imagination’ left an indelible mark on the postmodern Western philosophical discourse.

From the early days of Shestov’s reception in the U.K. and France, his dissonant message resonated with the concerns of absurdist or disenchanted Western essayists and writers at a time of unprecedented spiritual malaise, heralded by Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God and subsequently diagnosed by Freud’s postulation of the unconscious. The writers of D. H. Lawrence’s generation seized Shestov’s positive reassessment of the savage or nomad thinker to reinstate the creative autonomy of the human soul: ‘The positive central idea is that the human psyche, or soul, really believes in itself and in nothing else. [...] The human soul itself is the source and well-head of creative activity.’ Contrary to Freud’s dismissal of

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4 For a discussion of the role which Shestov played in the evolution of French philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, and in particular in the formulation of the ‘thought from outside’ and the ‘nomad thought’ in the philosophy of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, see the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition, *Léon Chestov – la pensée du dehors (1866 – 1938)* (Paris: Le Bruit du Temps/Société d’Études Léon Chestov, 2016), 111–131.

5 Shestov, *All Things Are Possible*, 38.

the existence of the soul, and of the primitive belief in ghosts (which he explored in his famous essay on Jensen’s *Gradiva*, ‘The Uncanny’), Shestov did not hesitate to qualify the alternative language of dreams, visions or apparitions as a ‘second dimension of thought’, whose truths were at the core of an individual’s conception of life and death, grief and survival, although they vanish as soon as the logical mind attempts to grasp and measure them against known criteria of possibility and impossibility. In his Introduction to an earlier collection of Shestov’s essays published in English translation in 1916, John Middleton Murry remarked on the ‘intimate connection between philosophy and life’ and the unity of all the energies of the human soul which conceptual thinking artificially divides between the real and the unreal, turning experiences into ‘deceptive, barren half-truths’.7 According to Murry, Shestov’s attitude to philosophical enquiry was that of a man ‘aware of himself as a soul seeking an answer to its own question; and […] aware of other souls on the same quest’.8 In stark opposition with the therapeutic vocation of Freudian psychoanalysis, which aims to bring the fantastic contours of the dream world down to the recognizable landscape of the ‘reality principle’, Shestov’s method is an invitation to a metaphysical journey, a ‘wandering among the souls’, akin to Dante Alighieri’s descent into the underworld. Shestov’s definition of philosophy as the ‘most worthy’ or ‘the only necessary thing’ (Plotinus’s *to timiotaton*), brings Plato’s notion of a ‘meditation on death and dying’ into contact with the Christian idea of redemption and the immortality of the soul.9 While both Freud and Shestov use myths and fictional stories to explore the other side of the rational world, Shestov’s allegory of the Angel of Death stages a most unsettling confrontation between two incompatible notions of truth and reality: on the one hand, the implacable truth of death and dying; on the other, the revelation of the outside of time. From the vantage point of the ultimate human experience, the opposites

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9 For a discussion of Shestov’s definition of philosophy with reference to the Plato’s *Phaedo* (64A) and Biblical revelation see my Introduction to the new annotated edition of Lev Shestov’s *Athens and Jerusalem* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), 1–20.
of life and death become the two sides of the same coin, just like time and eternity meet in the present in Zarathustra’s vision of the eternal return.\textsuperscript{10}

There is something so atypical, so ‘uncanny’ about Shestov’s approach to philosophical reflection that it risks going unnoticed. He comes from a different tradition of religious thinkers even within the Russian intellectual landscape of his time (which included Soloviev, Berdyaev and Bulgakov, among others). The period of relative neglect which Shestov’s existential philosophy went through in the post-war period, until Deleuze started mentioning him in the 1960s, reminds one of the manner in which Nietzsche attributed the ‘untimeliness’ of his works and their lack of popularity to a problem of acoustics. If the audience seemed deaf or unreceptive to Nietzsche’s work, this may have been due either to the frequency on which the message was sent or to the quality of listening of contemporary recipients:

\[
\ldots \text{no one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows. What one has no access to through experience one has no ear for. Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events which lie outside the possibility of general or even of rare experience – that it is the } first \text{ language for a new range of experiences. In this case simply nothing will be heard, with the acoustical illusion that where nothing is heard there is nothing ... This is in fact my average experience and, if you like, the } \text{originality of my experience.} \textsuperscript{11}
\]

Shestov’s existential critique of Kantian idealism was similarly unlikely to reach the ears of a wider audience at a time when the steady rise of Husserl’s phenomenological method was acting as a sound box for Heidegger’s ontology and Sartre’s atheist existentialism. In quoting Kant’s considerations on ‘experience which teaches us what is but does not say that what is must be precisely so and not otherwise’,\textsuperscript{12} Shestov alluded in his last work, \textit{Athens and Jerusalem}, to the obscured message

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{12} Immanuel Kant’s \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, quoted in Shestov, ‘On the Philosophy of the Middle Ages’, in \textit{Athens and Jerusalem}, 213.
\end{itemize}
of an undercurrent of philosophical reflection which from ancient times to the medieval period and from the advent of modernity to the late nineteenth century has strayed from the ‘sure path of science’ and ‘universal truth’ in order to reclaim the value of individual experience and revealed truth. Shestov’s interest in the philosophy of the Middle Ages derived from his preoccupation with the rare instances in the history of Western metaphysics when dissenting voices rose against the harmonious speculative reconciliation of Biblical revelation and Greek wisdom. The ability of tuning into the alternative, dissonant or absurd message, passed on from Plotinus to Duns Scotus and William Occam, according to Shestov, can be said to depend on one’s willingness to abide jarring contradictions (non pudet quia pudendum est, certum est quia impossibile) without dismissing them as ‘noise’ or, worse still, silence – ‘nothing to hear’. The problem, as Shestov sets it out in the opening paragraph of his exegesis of Etienne Gilson’s The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy, consists in establishing whether a Judeo-Christian philosophy ever existed and if so, ‘how was such a philosophy possible and what novelty did it bring to human thought’? The difficulty, which Gilson himself highlights, resides precisely in juxtaposing two incompatible strands of enquiry: on the one hand, the Judeo-Christian system of beliefs, grounded in Biblical revelation, and on the other, speculative thought, based on rational philosophical principles and logical argumentation. As Shestov often pointed out in his work, Pascal’s method of enquiry (chercher en gémissant – ‘seeking with lamentation’) cannot agree with Spinoza’s ‘non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere’ (not to laugh, not to lament or curse, but understand). If revelation ‘never proves anything, is founded on nothing, and is never justified’, contrary to rationalism which aspires to found, prove or justify each of its assertions, ‘how, then, could medieval philosophy discover a metaphysics in the Book of Exodus’? – asks Shestov, and then he adds: ‘Can there be a metaphysics where all proofs, on principle and once for all, are rejected?’ This absurd possibility finds support in Gilson’s statement, quoted at length by Shestov, about the

13 Shestov, ‘On the Philosophy of the Middle Ages’, in Athens and Jerusalem, 209.
14 Shestov, ‘On the Philosophy of the Middle Ages’, in Athens and Jerusalem, 212.
‘metaphysics of the Book of Exodus’ which ‘penetrates to the very heart of epistemology’ and introduces a new ‘notion, unknown to the ancients, of a created truth’.\textsuperscript{15} Religious philosophy, as Shestov argued, ‘is not the search for the eternal structure and order of immutable being; it is not reflection (\textit{Besinung})’ but ‘the final supreme struggle’\textsuperscript{16} of the soul on the threshold of death. The final struggle, which places each of us before the choice between the tree of knowledge and the tree of life, thus holds the promise of an overcoming of time ringing out in the enigmatic call to those meant to follow: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ (\textit{John 14:6}).

\textsuperscript{15} Shestov, ‘On the Philosophy of the Middle Ages’, in \textit{Athens and Jerusalem}, 212–213.

Acknowledgements

This work reflects my thinking over the twenty years since I left my home city of St Petersburg (formerly known as Leningrad), where I was born into a family of Russian–Jewish intelligentsia and lived for the first twenty-eight years of my life. The historical, cultural and spiritual challenges in the life and work of Lev Shestov as the philosopher, artist and God-seeker that this book focuses on are close to my heart. The former Russian capital city’s turbulent history, beauty and rich cultural atmosphere are entwined with the intense intellectual thirst and free artistic spirit that provided the driving force for this research project.

The concept for this book has developed over the last decade. It was during my studies on art theory and philosophy at Central Saint Martins in London and my subsequent visit to the Lev Shestov Archive at the Sorbonne in Paris, where I read Lev Shestov’s original manuscripts for the first time, that the notion of the ‘regeneration of convictions’ in the philosopher’s writings came to my attention. In early 2015, following intense discussion with my then supervisor Christopher Kul-Want in the corridors of Central Saint Martins, the seed for the main idea in this book – the possibility of a powerful, sudden and fundamental transformation in one’s beliefs and ideals – was planted.

In retrospect, I feel immensely grateful to my first teachers of art and philosophy in St Petersburg, Marina Davydovna Levina and Professor Vyacheslav Borisovich Melas, for their trust in the nature of my creative abilities and their encouragement of independent thinking. I would also like to thank Dr Ramona Fotiade for her reassuring supervision of my research as a doctoral student and for contributing with the Foreword to this book. I am grateful to Professor George Pattison for his helpful advice and for his support of my project. Special thanks are also due to Glasgow University and the Lev Shestov Studies Society. Most of all, I am indebted to my family who have supported me on my never-ending quest for learning, making it possible for me to dedicate many years to this academic endeavour. At
times the journey has been challenging, but I shall always remember these years with deep gratitude.

Amongst many people with whom I have discussed the ideas over the years and whose kindness and generosity contributed to the successful completion of this book, I would like to thank Charlotte Toupet-Martinet and Alla Rubitel especially. Various parts of the present text have been read by Stephen Ogden, Julian Neal, Binesh Hass, Margarita Jijina-Payne and three anonymous reviewers, to whom I would like to say a heartfelt thank you for their invaluable feedback. I also wish to express my appreciation to Nicholas Chevalier at the Sorbonne Library Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts and Saven Morris, the Head librarian of the British Psychoanalytical Society at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, for their assistance in finding key sources for my research.

Chapters 1 and 4 of this book include revised versions of my published papers, which originally appeared in The Oxford Philosopher, the Cyclops Journal, The Lev Shestov Journal and the European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling. I would like to express my gratitude to the Editor of The Oxford Philosopher, George P. Simmonds, for his hard work reading my earlier drafts at a time when the name of Lev Shestov was still unknown to the British reader. I am also deeply thankful to Laurel Plapp, the Commissioning Editor at Peter Lang, for her enthusiasm in undertaking my project and her expertise in bringing this book into print.

Marina G. Ogden
Hampstead, London
April 2021
## Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>AJ</td>
<td><em>Athens and Jerusalem</em></td>
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<td><em>Anton Tchekhov and Other Essays</em></td>
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<td><em>All Things Are Possible</em></td>
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<td>DC</td>
<td>‘Destroyer and creator of worlds: On Tolstoy’s eightieth birthday anniversary’</td>
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<td>DTN</td>
<td><em>Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche</em></td>
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<td>JB</td>
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<td>KEP</td>
<td><em>Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy: Vox Clamantis in Deserto</em></td>
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<td>LGP</td>
<td><em>Lectures on the History of Greek Philosophy</em></td>
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<td><em>Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes</em></td>
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<td><em>Sola Fide – By Faith Alone: Greek and Medieval Philosophy, Luther and the Church</em></td>
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For full publication details, please see the Bibliography.
INTRODUCTION

Philosophy as a Way of Thinking about Death

In the 1960s the Russian novelist Nina Berberova, reflecting on the tragic fate of Russian writers, poets, philosophers, musicians and artists living in exile in Paris in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War, poignantly remembered:

About twenty years ago I had a dream: I am standing in Leningrad at a railway station and am awaiting a train from Paris. It is a goods train, bringing émigré coffins to their homeland. I run along the platform; a long train stretches out slowly. On the first car is written in chalk: Miliukov, Struve, Rachmaninov, Chaliapin; on the second: Merezhkovsky, Bunin, Diaghilev, some others. I ask: Where is Khodasevich? A hand indicates to me the end of the train. A car flashes by with the inscription: Shestov, Remizov, Berdiaev. I continue to run. Finally, in the last car, with a beating heart I see this coffin. Why am I so disturbed, as if I were prepared to see him in the flesh? With a rumble the doors fly open and a dozen railway workers roll luggage trolleys up to them. They are unloading them! They are unloading them! Someone shouts behind my back. Suddenly I see other coffins next to Khodasevich's coffin in the half-darkness of the goods wagon: Esenin, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova … Why are they here? They did not die in Paris? There is some misunderstanding …

In Berberova's recollection of her dream twenty years after the incident, one can recognize a motif of human tragedy and horror associated with


the fate of a refugee forced to live a life in exile, unable to return to their homeland. The traumatic undertones of the writer’s memory seem to convey an awkward feeling of uncanny distortion, the paradoxical experience of the clash between familiar and unfamiliar, or an illusion of similarity, intensified by the puzzling absurdity of the dream-like occurrence.

Among a large number of Russian intellectuals who had arrived in France in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution was the philosopher Lev Shestov (Lev Isaakovich Schwarzmann, 1866–1938). In 1921 his article ‘The Conquest of the Self-Evident’ [La Lutte Contre les Évidences], which commemorated the 100th anniversary of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s birth, was published in Paris. One of Shestov’s first publications in France, the article comprised a metaphorical tale of the Angel of Death, which conveyed an audacious idea that in the depth of despair, when facing one’s own mortality, the individual’s thought can be transformed and liberated. However, to acquire faith in salvation one must ‘lose one’s reason’, for only faith in the absurd can overcome the horrors of existence and give us happiness in this life.

Contrary to the established viewpoint in the classical tradition that truth belongs to logic, whereas art primarily deals with beauty, Shestov described his philosophy as an art which originates in an ‘enormous absurdity’ and the ‘ugly reality’ of human existence. Concurrently, he credited Kant’s moral doctrine and his theory of a priori for creating the conditions for the emergence of the other kind of thinking: ‘when the unshakeable foundations of positivism will be shaken’ and ‘all the disturbing questions

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3 The article ‘Preodolenije samoochevidnostej (k stoletiu rozhdenija F. M. Dostoevskogo)’ [The Conquest of the Self-Evident (on 100th anniversary of F. M. Dostoevsky’s Birth)] was first published in Sovremennye Zapiski [Contemporary Notes], 8–10 (Paris, 1921–1922) and later was included in the volume In Job’s Balances (1968), 56–150.


Introduction

of life must in some way or other be transferred to the realm of the unknowable.” Against the grain of the predominantly rational worldview of his contemporaries – Western philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century – Shestov’s philosophical inquiry developed in opposition to Hegel’s famous statement that ‘what is real is rational’ \( [\textit{was wirklich ist, ist vernünftig}] \). The Russian philosopher perceived the whole history of world thought as a history of the struggle of faith and reason, which for him was the conflict between philosophy based on the individual’s existential experience and theoretical philosophy.

Similarly to his friend and colleague Edmund Husserl, the Russian thinker saw Western culture in a state of deep crisis and sought the radical transformation of philosophy. In contrast to Husserl, whose pursuit of absolute certainty relied on the self-evidence of universally valid truth for one and all, Shestov’s existential worldview represented a break with rationalism, with the scientific way of thought and with attempts to found morality on the principles of reason and on laws dictated by reason. In the spirit of Nietzsche, who stated that every great philosophy is at core a personal confession, Shestov took up the ancient dispute between faith and knowledge, and, opposing instinct to reason, he treated it with unprecedented intensity and depth. As George Kline observed, ‘Shestov

8 Shostov’s understanding of reason is that of rational authority that governs our thoughts, or a number of rules which tell us to act in a certain way.
10 Valentin F. Asmus, ‘Existential Philosophy: Its Intentions and Results (Lev Shostov as Its Adept and Critic)’, \textit{Russian Studies in Philosophy} 44/4 (Spring 2006), 30. Reason here is understood in the vein of Kant, as the faculty of the logical form of cognition; concepts and principles governed by rational knowledge.
saw an irresolvable opposition between the universal claims of reason and the particularity and uniqueness of the individual person.\footnote{George L. Kline, ‘Scepticism and Faith in Shestov’s Early Critique of Rationalism’, \textit{Studies of Eastern European Thought} 63 (2011), 21.} In the vein of Kierkegaard, Shestov discovered the possibility of salvation, or ‘the corridor to faith’.\footnote{Søren Kierkegaard, \textit{The Sickness Unto Death}, trans. Alistair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), 82.}

In Shestov’s existential view, a human being is a ‘creature without internal compass’, whose needs and dreams force him to wander.\footnote{Lev Shestov, Paris, The Sorbonne Library, The Lev Shestov Archive, \textit{Léon Chestov Manuscrits}, MS 2100, Manuscript 1 (1896), draft for \textit{Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes}, 5 (my translation). All translations from the Lev Shestov Archive, as well as translations from other sources in Russian are my own unless otherwise noted.} He sees the role of philosophy as a ‘wandering through human souls’, and for him, ‘the greater philosophers were ever wanderers through souls.’\footnote{Lev Shestov, \textit{In Job’s Balances} (henceforth: \textit{JB}), trans. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968), 356.} His existential philosophy aimed to establish a new \textit{free} way of thinking, which manifested itself as the struggle against the delusion that we have a rational grasp of the necessary truths on matters that are of the greatest importance to us, such as our concern with life and death. Struck by an intrinsic connection between anxiety and death, Shestov understood the purpose of philosophy as teaching us to live our lives without certainty and helping us to confront our existential fear and anxiety in the face of inevitable death. He often quoted Plato’s famous definition of philosophy: ‘All who actually engage in philosophy aright are practising nothing other than dying and being dead.’\footnote{Plato, \textit{Phaedo} (64A), 8. In \textit{Potestas Clavium} [The Power of Keys] (1923), Shestov wrote: ‘But Plato speaks to us of a deep mystery that only the initiates know. This mystery consists in the fact that philosophers have only one purpose, which is to prepare themselves for death and dying.’ Lev Shestov, \textit{Potestas Clavium}, trans. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968), 342.} Inspired by Plato, Shestov identified the subject of death and passing to be the real aim for philosophers.\footnote{Marina Jijina-Ogden [Marina G. Ogden], ‘Paradox and Despair in Lev Shestov’s \textit{All Things Are Possible}, \textit{The Oxford Philosopher} (29 July
The phenomena of suffering and death became the central theme of Shestov’s philosophy. As David Gascoyne pointed out, the thought of death is like ‘a constant groundnote’ for Shestov; a starting point as well as the ultimate goal for speculative thought. Tormented by the thought of the irrevocability of the past and the finality of the loss of what is most precious to human beings, Shestov directed his full attention to human life as the source for his philosophy. Thus, according to Andrius Vaičiūnas, ‘Shestov lived for the purpose of examining life, of looking at all the occurrences of life, of taking into account the observations of human psychology and human behaviour and trying to draw conclusions from them.’ Speaking from the perspective of his own experience, Shestov reminded us that we may not only be concerned with living and organizing our lives, but also with our forthcoming death and preparation for it. After all, as he suggested, one should search for clues about death in life and not the other way around.

In the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, ‘Shestov was a philosopher who philosophized with his whole being, for whom philosophy was not an academic specialty but a matter of life and death.’

The Russian émigré thinker’s anti-dogmatic, penetrating analysis of the human psyche and his original method of reading of other authors made a lasting impression on his contemporaries, writers and philosophers such as D. H. Lawrence, G. K. Chesterton, Ivan Bunin, Nikolai Berdyaev, Nikolai Lossky, Benjamin Fondane, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, George Bataille, Czeslaw Milosz, Emil Cioran and Miguel de Unamuno. The conception of the parable of the Angel of Death advanced Shestov’s philosophical investigation into the territory of an interdisciplinary spectrum. Comparable to

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21 Lev Shestov, MS 2100, Manuscript 2 (1896), draft for *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*, 46.
what Derrida called the ‘unconscious text’, the parable revealed an interaction of hermeneutical traces in which meaning and force are united.23 Subsequently, Shestov’s innovative ability to combine Russian religious philosophy with Nietzschean aphoristic style was favourably received in the work of postmodern philosophers in France. Most notably, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* highlighted the original and significant contribution Shestov made to European philosophy. Considering the Russian thinker’s philosophy in line with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, they suggested that Shestov’s paradoxical thinking and method of argumentation exemplify the ‘thought from outside’, characteristic of the ‘nomad philosopher’.24

Often described as a paradoxical thinker, an existential writer, existential humanist, philosopher–artist, philosophizing theologian, ‘philosopher-dukhoborets’ (‘spirit wrestler’, or ‘culture-warrior’) and a preacher of the philosophy of despair and inescapability, Shestov became known as a representative of authentically existential philosophy in the West, and a profoundly disturbing Russian thinker.25 Thus, one of the spokesmen of the French existential movement, Emil Cioran, refers to him as ‘the greatest

historian of philosophy’ and observes that while Shestov’s work is ‘well-reasoned and controlled’, his thought ‘has nothing to do with Anglo-Saxon philosophy’. The Russian émigré thinker’s compelling exploration of the problem of the absurd tragedy of individual existence found a response in the writings of French existentialist writers Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Benjamin Fondane and Vladimir Jankélévich amongst others.

After receiving significant recognition among French intellectuals in Paris, Shestov’s work was appreciated by a number of British writers and philosophers, such as G. K. Chesterton, John Middleton Murry, David Gascoyne, D. H. Lawrence and Isaiah Berlin. Thus, D. H. Lawrence in his foreword to the English edition of Shestov’s All Things Are Possible (The Apotheosis of Groundlessness) pointed out that ‘Everything is possible’ is Shestov’s ‘central cry’, his attempt to ‘shake free of the human psyche from old bonds’. In conformity with D. H. Lawrence, David Gascoyne highlights ‘anti-idealism’ and ‘anti-rationalism’ as the most outstanding characteristics of Shestov’s philosophy. In his account, Shestov is ‘one of the great existential philosophers’, who had a true understanding of the significance of existential philosophy and its role in the crisis of modern thought, although his message has been unjustly neglected and his importance altogether underestimated.

Shestov’s philosophy became better known in the English-speaking world in the 1960s thanks to Bernard Martin’s translations, analysis and editing of many of Shestov’s articles and books. According to Martin, the great task of Shestov’s life was to demonstrate that the ‘self-evident truths’ of rational philosophy are not as unassailable as is commonly held. Describing this quality of the Russian philosopher’s writing as an

27 Lawrence, ‘Foreword’, in Shestov, ATP, 10.

In keeping with Martin, David Patterson suggests that Shestov’s religious outlook must be considered primary to his irrationalism, which is a form of the thinker’s creativity.\footnote{David Patterson, \textit{Faith and Philosophy} (Washington, DC: University Press of America, Inc., 1982), 52.}

In a similar vein, Dominic Rubin recently refers to Shestov as a ‘Jewish prophet and outsider’ and emphasizes that Shestov’s God is both ‘unknown and unknowable’.\footnote{Dominic Rubin, \textit{Holy Russia, Sacred Israel: Jewish–Christian Encounters in Russian Religious Thought} (London: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 215, 221.} Precisely, for Rubin, Shestov’s philosophy exemplifies ‘a Judaism of his own making’, which could also be described as a ‘genuine Christianity’.\footnote{Rubin, \textit{Holy Russia, Sacred Israel}, 218.}

In the country of his birth, however, Shestov’s ideas were not eagerly welcomed. During Soviet times in Russia, Shestov was deemed a ‘vulgar mystic’ and an ‘irrationalist’, and he became known as an ‘anti-philosopher’.\footnote{Urij Margolin, ‘Antifilosof’ [Antiphilosopher], \textit{Novyi Zhurnal} [New Journal] 99 (New York, 1969), 224–236.}

In the Soviet Union Shestov’s name was not mentioned until the 1970s and his works were not published until the end of the 1980s.\footnote{Zakydalsky, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, 3.}

As a result, according to Taras Zakydalsky, one of the outstanding Russian philosophers of the twentieth century has become the most isolated and ‘un-Russian’ thinker, whose thought can only be understood when grasped in its contradictory evolution.\footnote{Taras D. Zakydalsky, ‘Lev Shestov and the Revival of Religious Thought in Russia’, in James P. Scanlan, ed., \textit{Russian Thought after Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage} (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 153–155.}

The situation began to change in the mid-1970s when two important articles were published dedicated to Lev Shestov’s existential thought. Firstly, in the 1972 article entitled ‘Lev Shestov i Kierkegor (ob otnoshenii