

TWO ATTEMPTS TO OVERCOME THE LACK OF EFFECT

Mihai D. Vasile*

mdvasile@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The twentieth century was a century of revolutions crisis - because it began with a planetary revolution of founding and ended up with a revolution of planetary destruction of the foundation; between the beginning and the end there was the Holocaust - but extended in the third millennium century. Human being, from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century, took place from the eclipse of reason to the eclipse of the absolute. The author presents two philosophical attempts to overcome the sense lack of the absolute.*

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I. The return to Jerusalem in Léon Shestov's work

Among the thinkers who emigrated from Russia became Bolshevik, Léon Shestov is the emblematic for the philosophical way to propose solutions to the crisis of European culture. His work, *Atènes et Jerusalem (Athens and Jerusalem)* is considered the most important which places the author among the prominent religious thinkers of the twentieth century. In the philosophical key, *Atènes et Jerusalem* is significant in attempting to find his own path of rebellion against "self-sufficiency" Western civilization corrupted through reason, technology and pragmatism, against Faust's damnation, soul empty, as the emblem of the West, against the man who is killing his neighbor "in cold blood" according to a carefully fixed plan. Léon Shestov's argument is obviously influenced by the great existential themes of the time, claimed in F. M. Dostoevsky's magnificent work, and especially evident in French existentialism: antiscientism, alienation, absurdity, social collapse etc.

However, the depth of Léon Shestov's thinking is not universally recognized, nor his work is not widely studied. Even in Europe, where his genius was praised by the philosophers of the first magnitude as Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Albert Camus, D. H. Lawrence and John Middleton Murry, Léon Shestov did not enjoy of a great popularity during his lifetime and more than 60 years after his death, *Athens and Jerusalem* is too little read. In America, his name is virtually unknown, even among professional philosophers and theologians, that is regrettable but understandable because Léon Shestov did not found any philosophical or theological school, nor had his disciples to spread his work, except Benjamin Fondaine (Fundoianu), who became one of his few supporters in the years 1923-1924, and wrote several articles about Shestov, remaining manuscript, entitled *Sur les Rives de l'Ilissus (On the Shores of the River Illissus)*, published in 1964, in "Mercure de France", and in volume in titled *Recontres avec Léon Shestov* (Paris, Plasma, 1982). But the most important reason for the relative obscurity of Shestov work is his anti-modernism obstinacy.

Gods of the twentieth century - science, technology, the idea of inevitable historical progress – there were idols for Léon Shestov, without any significance, but by their terrible destructiveness. The revolt against scientism and philosophical rationalism was carried by Léon Shestov with a huge passion and a subtle dialectic art of controversy,

* Ph.D – Pitești University.

which drew attention to his work *Athens and Jerusalem*. His diatribes against untested or untestable assumptions of rationalist metaphysics and factual sciences, and his penetrating analysis of the singularity, the inexplicable and the oddity of human mind have produced a deep impression, at least on some important figures of the French existentialist movement. Albert Camus, for example, emphasized the intensity and concentration of the expression power in Shestovian works: “Shestov in his work wonderfully monotonous, steadily tightened its attention to the same truths, continually demonstrating that the most rigorous system, the most universal incidentally gives rationality of human thought over irrational. None of the ironic statements, or ridiculous contradictions that devalues reason, do not escape to his attention. Only one thing is interested, except to say, either in the heart or mind. In the Dostoievskian experiences of the condemned man, in the extreme adventures of the Nietzschean spirit, in the Hamletian implications, or in Ibsen's bitter aristocracy, he discovers, illuminates and enhances the human revolt against the irremediable. Denying justifications for reason, he moves with determination in the heart of the colorless desert where all certainties hardened”¹.

For Léon Shestov, however, the revolt against rationalism and scientism - as Albert Camus recognizes - was only a preliminary step², because, in the mature period of his life, and especially in its ended part, Shestov was firmly convinced of the truth of the Biblical message, that only the interiorization of faith in *Scripture* - which proclaims that man and the universe are the creation of a personal God and that Almighty God created man in His own image - gave to man the creative power and freedom to believe that he can free mankind from the horrors of the existence. But such a faith, face to the mechanistic and rationalistic assumptions upon which modern thinking, scientific and philosophical mind set, now dominant in the Western man mentality, can only be achieved through an exhausting struggle against what is usually called the “self-evidence” truth. Léon Shestov tried to show, by his own struggle, the way against the “self-evidence”. Mastering the entire Western philosophical tradition and modern European literature, gives to Shestov a vast erudition used, with an excessive passion and an extraordinary literary talent, to produce a brilliant indictment on the rationalist and scientific metaphysics in order to restore respect for the human being what he sees as the most precious gift received by man: the right towards God and to the primordial freedom given by God to the human. William Barrett characterized Léon Shestov's work, when he presented it to the American readers, as: “it shows to what the Western European spirit looks like, in its classicism and rationalism - in particular, the Russian soul - a spectator never satisfied with any philosophical answer that falls passionately and completely out of his own humanity”³.

In the last decades of his life, Léon Shestov was depressed by what he called in a letter to Sergei Bulgakov “the nightmare of evil and disbelief that swept humanity”, being convinced that only through a supreme effort man can wake up from this nightmare. Coping with the nightmare is fully reflected in Léon Shestov latest book, the monumental work *Athens and Jerusalem*, where he endeavoured for many years and earned the last addition just prior to death, which occurred on November 20, 1938 in Paris.

Athens and Jerusalem is actually a collection of studies written and published by Léon Shestov between 1928 and 1937. During the year 1938 appeared, in turn, the German edition in Vienna, translated by H. Ruoff, then the French edition.

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the English translation by Justin O'Brien, New York, Vintage Books, 1955, p. 19.

² *Ibidem*, p. 24–28.

³ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, New York, Garden City, Doubleday and Company, 1958, p. 14.

Posthumously, in 1951, it appeared, in the volume, the Russian-language edition. Léon Shestov considered *Athens and Jerusalem* as his major work which leads just on the line the old opposition between knowledge and belief, pending completion of ontological rift between rational and irrational, between God and world, over four memorable chapters ordered by style and very elegant, concentrated than in the least by the classical Russian literature throughout the modern prose⁴, namely: I. *Parmenide enchainé* (*Parmenides enchained*); II. *Dans le taureau de Phalaris* (*In the Falaris' bull*); III. *De la Philosophie médiévale* (*On the Medieval Philosophy*), IV. *La seconde Dimension de la Pensée* (*The second Dimension of Thinking*).

Shestov Léon (on his real name - Schwarzmänn Isaakovici Lev) was born on 12 February 1866 in Kiev, a wealthy Hebrew family. His father, Isaak Moiseev Schwarzmänn possess, besides an important contract for linen drapery, and rich knowledge of ancient Hebrew writings and on militant Zionism. Young Leon attended secondary studies in Kiev and then to Moscow, and entered undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Law, University of Kiev, but also without obtaining a doctorate in law, as his doctoral thesis was prohibited by censorship. From 1891-1896 he worked in his father's contracting, during which time he had an illegitimate son, Sergei Listopodov with Aniuta Listopodova, maid of orthodox religion. The ambiguity link with Aniuta Listopodova has a strong product, which caused him a depression in order to leave for Switzerland for treatment, where he dedicated to the literary work. In 1897 he married Anna Eleasarovna Beresovskaia, medical student. In 1898 he published, in Russian, the book *Shakespeare and his critic Brandes*, where he used to sign the pseudonym Lev Shestov that kept for life. Russian Revolution of 1917 caught him in Moscow, where from he returned in 1918 in Kiev, but in 1920 he left Soviet Russia to Geneva to live with his family until 1921 when he settled in Paris, France, becoming his second home. In Paris, he discovered the French existentialist movement, which in turn has made many friends. French is the most fertile period in Léon Shestov's creative philosophical life. Now his important philosophical works appear: *Potestas Clavium* (*Power of Keys*, published in Berlin in 1932); *Les Révélations de la Mort* (*Death Revelations*, Paris, Plon, 1923); *La Nuit de Gethsémani* (*Night of Gethsemane*, Paris, Grasset, 1923); *Na vesah Iova* (*In the balance of Job* - 1929); *Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentialiste* (*Kierkegaard and the Existentialist Philosophy*, 1936); and his masterpiece *Athènes et Jerusalem* (*Athens and Jerusalem*, 1938).

After his death, there were appeared in press, a series of laudatory articles signed by N. Berdyaev, I. Mandelstam, B. Schloezer etc. In Jerusalem, in December 1938, Martin Buber delivered a panegyric in memory of Léon Shestov. In the same month, a committee was formed in Paris in order to publish the complete works of Léon Shestov.

To speak about *Athènes et Jerusalem* (*Athens and Jerusalem*, 1938), Léon Shestov supports that the most scientists and philosophers have tried to identify those self-evident propositions, logically consistent and empirically verifiable, which really are universal and eternal truths. Their effort resulted in the discovery that man is simply a link in the endless chain of phenomena, and he lives in a universe governed entirely by the iron law of causal necessity. They assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that human freedom is an illusion and that human freedom of action within the meaning of self-determination is severely limited by network-necessary and unchanging causal relations in which man is chained, which painfully exercise his invincible power on him. Consequently, scientists and philosophers believed that the path of wisdom and virtue to man is not a riot - useless, anyway - but in recovery and submission. The first chapter, *Parmenide enchainé*, of Léon Shestov's book *Athènes et Jerusalem*, is dedicated to the

⁴ D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*, London, Mouton & Co., 1964, p. 426.

idea of necessity that Shestov analysis under its Greek name of *Ananké*⁵. European man - Shestov says - is wasting away for centuries in a hypnotic sleep induced by the belief that the universe is governed by external and self-evident truths that can be discovered through reason (such as the identity and the non-contradiction principles) and by indifferent eternal and unalterable power that determines events and facts. This power is commonly called necessity. God himself, for a thinker like Spinoza, has no power to transcend the necessary determinations which express His being. And Spinoza is - in Shestov's view - the height of mechanistic philosophy which has dominated European metaphysics since Aristotle⁶. In *Parmenide enchainé*, Shestov endeavours to prove that "following the path of science, the great philosophers have lost the most precious gift of the Creator: their freedom"⁷. There were, of course, solitary figures who have challenged the claim of reason to access self-evident truths and refused to accept the dictates of natural sciences, but there were only *vox clamavi in desertum* ("voice crying in the wilderness"). Tertullian was such a voice, and in modern times, Dostoyevsky, who, in *Notes from Underground* and *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, dared to carry the strongest "critique of the reason" usually attributed to Kant⁸. Léon Shestov found a tremendous heroism and tragic nobility in Dostoyevsky's desperate cry to resist self-evident truths of science and philosophy to ceased the reverences in front of the reason and towards the glorification of its conquests, although it seems that the revolt against them is a futile exercise.

The implacability of the nature and thinking laws - Shestov considers - is the gift of the Greeks (which must beware) and Athens. If man would listen to the old message of the *Bible*, that Shestov personified by the "Jerusalem", he would find there a conception about God and the universe, and of himself also, that not only gives meaning to resistance, but make it first and essential step in reconciliation man with God and regain human freedom. *Bible*, in contrast to Western science and philosophy, proclaims that God is omnipotent, nothing is impossible for Him and His power is absolutely unlimited, He is not only central but also at the beginning and end of all things. In accordance with the *Bible*, God created both man and the universe without any deficiency, because it is written that "God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good" (*Genesis*, 1: 31). After creation, God blessed man and gave him dominion over the entire universe, but also gave the most precious gift, freedom. Man is not a slave, unless waived by the primordial freedom - as indeed all the people do by their obsession to acquire scientific knowledge and rational explanations - in favor of necessary laws power and universal causality or in favor of the inalterable empirical facts.

Bible refuses to recognize any fact as ultimate or eternal subsistence, but it considers all in God's power, and to the cry of the desperate man, *Bible* assumes that God can answer suppressing any fact. For biblical faith, the so-called "truths of reason" and "factual truths" do not exist, do not constitute the ultimate goal of human life. Against the assumption that human existence is justified by knowledge, existentialist philosophy originated in the *Bible* insists that human existence and experience justify any knowledge as man desires⁹. There is no reconciliation - Shestov supports - between science and philosophy which aspire to rational certainty, on one hand, and the biblical religion, on the other. Following Tertullian, Léon Shestov is proclaiming that Athens will never fall to an agreement with Jerusalem, even though two thousand years ago, the

⁵ Léon Chestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem*. Un essai de philosophie religieuse. Traduit du russe par Boris de Schloezer, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1938, p. 11 sq.

⁶ *Ibidem*: p. XXIX.

⁷ *Ibidem*: p. XXX.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. XXVIII.

⁹ Léon Chestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem*. Un essai de philosophie religieuse. Traduit du russe par Boris de Schloezer, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1938, p. XXII-XXX.

leading Western thinkers have believed firmly and strove to make reconciliation possible. Biblical revelation can not be agreed with scientific metaphysics because it has no support, nor logical ground, neither scientific argument.

Léon Shestov was haunted for years by the Biblical story of the fall of man, and explained it in the end so: when Adam ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, faith has been replaced by reason and scientific knowledge. Adam's sin was repeated by his followers and its implacable consequence did not lead to the knowledge of ultimate truth, but to suppress the source of life and to the destruction of primary human freedom.

In Léon Shestov's view, the speculative philosophy that begins with the Socratic amazement and the intellectual curiosity, seeking "to understand" phenomena in the universe, pushes the man to a dead end, where the humans lose the vision of personal freedom and the possibility of ultimate truth. When philosophy becomes, as it should be already, an unleashed and passionate battle against the necessary and self-evident truths that constrain and crush the spirit, when it will refuse to draw a distinction between sentences as "Athenians poisoned Socrates" and "a rabid dog was poisoned", watching them with the same "philosophical" indifference, then philosophy will be able to make the man receptive to the revelation of *Scripture* and to a possible repair with God. Léon Shestov argues that the starting point of true wisdom is found in the Psalmist's words: "From the depths cry unto thee, O Lord"; and "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"¹⁰.

Dans le taureau de Phalaris (In the Falaris' bull) is considered by Léon Shestov the most difficult chapter of his book, as it strives to highlight the unbreakable link between knowledge - as understood by rationalist philosophy - and the horrors of human existence. Starting with Nietzsche, that glorified ruthless cruelty and swore eternal faith to a *fatum*, indestructible and unavoidable, Shestov overthrew the plans and took the "immoral" pride of Nietzsche, rebelled against destiny (*fatum*) when uttering the sermon "beyond good and evil" and "the will to power", as well as about the fall of Socrates. The revolt against science can be seen - as Shestov appreciates - in all its glory from Kierkegaard, where the gentle Christendom loses all patience and are impregnated with a ferocity of the despair that transforms it in an ancient fate that incriminates the moment when "the fact" won the sovereign right to determine the man's and the Creator's will.

Medieval philosophy (that constitutes the substance of chapter III, named also by the author *concupiscentia invincibilis* - "the invincible lust") only made unsuccessful efforts to reconcile the biblical, revealed truth with the Greek truth. Finally, Part Four, *The second Dimension of Thinking*, states in an apophthegmatic way that the truths of reason compels the human being - and Shestov, added "maybe" - but they are far from to convince always of their uniqueness and singularity. Therefore "*ridere, lugere et detestari, flere*" ("to laugh, to cry and hate, to regret"), as acts getting out of the limits of reason, not only do not find solution and explanation in the "*intelligere*" ("to understand") faculty, but they reach a certain level of tension, the uprising against the comprehension, in a desperate and terrible battle, overthrowing and destroying reason. Philosophy, as understood by Shestov in *Athens and Jerusalem*, is not a curious sight on a discarded method of speculation as a detached and dispassionate reflection - what Husserl called *Besinnung* - but the final battle.

Léon Shestov rejects the power of the inanimate and indifferent truths that have become the forbidden fruit of the knowledge tree. Universality and necessity, the philosophers always aspired to greed and who have entertained and lied, awaken a terrible idea, namely that beyond them, the human being is threatened by the dreaded

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

curse “you will die”, which is the biblical form of the reason critique. The supreme being, transformed into an object of philosophical speculation and rationalist metaphysics, as a chapter about *deus ex machine*, does not mean - for Shestov - the final paragraph of philosophy, but rather, the Only and Lonely that can give meaning and content to the human existence, and which may, therefore, lead to the true philosophy on the human freedom.

What finally Léon Shestov opposed to reason and to rational knowledge - he considered them the ineluctable tools of ontological rift between the human and the divine, and the cause of the human fall in ephemeral temporality - is faith, in the meaning of the St. Paul words “whatever is not from faith is sin”¹¹, faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and not in the God of philosophers), in the God who promises, in the words of the evangelist Mark “anything you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you’ll have”¹². The true philosophy - proposed by Shestov as a means of saving the human being, and to acquire the primordial freedom and to restore the direct link between man and God - called by the author in *Athens and Jerusalem*, “religious philosophy”, does not seek to discover the structure and the order of the Immutable Being there from eternity. Do not seek nor understand the difference between good and evil, which a rationalist philosophy presents, in a liar way, that brings peace to an exhausted humanity. The true philosophy is released of knowledge, and by an exceeding and ultimate strain, goes beyond of the human, deceptive and demoniac aspiration that through knowledge man could in the likeness of the Creator, as the Tempter suggested to Eve. “Religious philosophy” is so - in Léon Shestov’s view - the man’s final battle to retake his primary freedom and the divine *valde bonum* (“a lot of well”), which was divided, after the downfall, in the human helplessly good and the human evil destroyer. Through the religious philosophy - states Shestov - the old “ontological” criticism (with Greek etymology, *krinein*, “to distinguish, to discriminate”) of reason is restored, either in Martin Luther’s words, “*bellua qua non occisa homo non potest vivere*” (“man can not live if the monster is killed in some way”), or in the biblical formula “you will die”, because human wisdom is foolishness in front of God, and the wisest of men is the greatest sinner, as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have glimpsed.

Athens and Jerusalem Shestov book ends aphoristic mode that is so self: “Philosophy does not mean «Besinnen» - in German «to look back» - but is struggling. And this fight will never end. God’s kingdom, as it is said, is achieved through violence”¹³.

Despite its ambiguities, exaggerations and inconsistencies, *Athens and Jerusalem* remains a contemporary book with a vital significance coined by a thinker who, paradoxically, schooled in the Western philosophical tradition, rejects this tradition with a passionate intensity, on behalf of the human freedom, discovering in it a mortal threat to the human spirit, writing in a style, neither theological nor religious apologetic, but rather also like the ancient prophets, in order to summon the man in the end to leave Athens and to seek salvation in Jerusalem.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. XXII.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. XXXII.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 465.