

Athens
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Jerusalem

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

Lev Shestov—The Thought from Outside

Ramona Fotiade

An influential forerunner of French Existentialism, best known for his unique blend of Russian religious philosophy and Nietzschean aphoristic thought, Lev Shestov (1866–1938) elaborated a radical critique of rational knowledge from the point of view of individual existence. His view of philosophy as “the most worthy” (τὸ τιμιώτατον) was inspired by Plotinus’s flight “beyond reason and knowledge” in order to grasp the meaning of life, free from the constraints of logical and ethical thinking, which pose death as the ultimate limit of temporal existence.

One of the precursors of the generation of Absurdist playwrights and essayists (most notably acknowledged in the works of Camus and Ionesco), Shestov fought against the disparagement of real, individual beings and personal experience in a world rendered absurd by the drive toward absolute knowledge and scientific objectivity. He saw the effects of the dehumanizing search for mathematical certainty in the gradual confinement of philosophical investigation to abstract, logical matters, which culminated in Husserl’s phenomenology. “Philosophy as rigorous science” (defined along the principles of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*) not only confirmed the nonexistence of real, temporal entities, from the point of view of scientific thought, but also restated the equivalence between thought and true being, on the one hand, and true being and meaning, on the other. Within this framework, the search for truth becomes a search for meaning (achieved through intentional constitution), and whatever cannot be “constituted” in the same manner as mathematical objects (e.g., the rule of “ $2 \times 2 = 4$ ”), or concepts (such as the idea of “table” in general), falls outside the category of true being and has no intelligible meaning and no place in philosophical discourse. Shestov sought to restore the rights of the living individual against the rise of the scientific mentality that discarded insoluble metaphysical questions and viewed life in a necessary relationship to death and destruction.

If he frequently recalled Plato's definition of philosophy as "practice for death" and meditation on dying, Shestov did so in order to remind readers and contemporary philosophers that reflection on ultimate realities is not a disinterested pursuit of knowledge but a constant struggle against the logical certainty of one's fleeting passage through time and eventual annihilation. Philosophy, in Shestov's view, is more akin to a combat strategy, a "fight against self-evidence" (which echoes the revolt of Dostoevsky's underground man against the rule of " $2 \times 2 = 4$ " as a principle of death), and leads to spiritual awakening. The notion of "awakening," which Shestov takes up from Plotinus, corresponds to the "second sight" that man acquires when "the corporeal eyes begin to lose their sharpness" (according to Plato's *Symposium* 219A). This metaphorical description of a shift in one's thinking points to the fact that the soul lies sleeping in the body, and that it takes a considerable effort to change the way one normally sees the world, a process which Shestov compares with the experience of a dreamer struggling to awaken from a nightmare. Two contradictory, yet equally convincing, perceptions of reality are confronted in the dreamer's consciousness: one places the subject in an impersonal environment, which is indifferent to human suffering and desires, and within which events pursue their course in an implacable manner; the other opens up the possibility of freeing oneself from logical principles and awakening to a reality in which the cries of Job and of the Psalmist are heard and answered. However curious this may seem, as Shestov remarks, the impression of internal consistency and necessity accompanies not only the dreamer's absurd experience of the world (as he imagines, for instance, that "he is the Emperor of China and that . . . he is engraving monograms on the surface of a sphere with one dimension only") but also the perception of the world of the man who "is only guided by reason" in the waking state and who cannot conceive the existence of a reality unfettered by the laws of causality, temporal irreversibility, and death.

We are like sleepwalkers in a world whose logic and a priori principles seem unsurpassable and prevent us from seeing the incongruities and arbitrary connections which make up the fabric of our daily lives. It takes an extraordinary effort of the will to break the spell of self-evident truths and awaken from the nightmare of one's powerless submission to misfortune, injustice, suffering, and death. Being able to reject Spinoza's Stoical injunction "do not laugh, do not curse or mourn, but understand" amounts to a radical choice: a choice confronting every individual who has become aware of the unbearable nature of the human condition. One can either try to come to terms with the "logical necessity" of death or refuse to accept the a priori law of temporal existence and adopt instead the contradictory belief that man is destined for a "higher lot," and that he can overcome

death. This opposition between two modes of thinking and two philosophical traditions is perfectly captured by Tertullian's famous dictum ("What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"), which serves as a springboard for Shestov's argument in his final and most compelling "essay of religious philosophy."

Written over a period of twelve years and published shortly before the author's death in 1938, Shestov's philosophical testament, *Athens and Jerusalem*, sets up a gripping confrontation between the two symbolic poles of ancient wisdom: "Athens" (i.e., Greek thought as source of Western European philosophy) and "Jerusalem" (i.e., the Judeo-Christian tradition based on Biblical revelation). Before Shestov made it his favorite theme of reflection, the tension between rational analysis and faith had been a subject of theological debate and literary writing from the early Fathers of the Church to the founder of modern existential philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard. Shestov's project of a study devoted to the philosophy of religion and inspired by Tertullian's remark dates back to 1909–10, when Shestov was writing his article on Tolstoy (entitled "Destroyer and Builder of Worlds") and working on a book on Luther, *Sola Fide*, which he never finished (due to the outbreak of World War I), but whose arguments and themes were later incorporated into *Potestas Clavium* (1923), a critique of the Catholic doctrine of salvation through works in opposition to the doctrine of salvation through "faith alone." The circumstances in which Shestov first discovered Tertullian's antirationalist statement of belief ("I believe because it is absurd") are also indicative of the evolution of his thought prior to his encounter with Husserl's phenomenology and his polemic against the rising scientific strand in philosophical enquiry.

According to the recollection of his friend and disciple Benjamin Fondane, Shestov came across the famous passage from the treatise on the incarnation (*De Carne Christi*) in his youth, most probably in the 1900s, given that the earliest mention of Tertullian crops up in Shestov's controversial volume of aphorisms, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (1905), subtitled "Essay in Adogmatic Thinking," which was published in English translation as *All Things Are Possible* (1920):

I was young, I was searching, I lacked daring. And then I found that text by Tertullian (*Et mortuus est Dei filius: non pudet quia pudendum est. Et sepultus resurrexit: certum est quia impossibile*—"and the son of God died: we are not ashamed, because it is shameful; he was buried and rose again: I believe it because it is absurd.") You know where I found it? In a big book by Harnack, in the footnote, at the bottom of the page. Harnack cites it as some sort of oddity—good enough for the basement, not good enough to insert in the main text.¹

In his preface to *All Things Are Possible*, D. H. Lawrence highlighted the gaping rift between Russian “rootless” vitalism and European culture that Shestov’s free-spirited critique of Western idealism brought into view. The less conspicuous opposition between Greek rationalism and Biblical revelation, which subtended the ideological and stylistic dismantling of the Western metaphysical discourse in Shestov’s collection of aphorisms, came across indirectly in Lawrence’s recurrent reference to the radical alterity of Russian religious thought: “[Russia’s] genuine Christianity, Byzantine and Asiatic, is incomprehensible to us. So with her true philosophy.” If “Russia will certainly inherit the future,” in Lawrence’s view, it is because the paradoxical message Russia brings comes from outside the tradition of Western speculative thought and testifies to the existence of an alternative tradition, a “rootless” and “nomad” undercurrent of philosophical reflection, which includes not only Tertullian but also Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche. More recently, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari also remarked on the figure of the “nomad” (in “Treatise on Nomadology”²) and on the striking discontinuity that Shestov’s Russian brand of paradoxical thinking introduces in the European tradition of rationalist discourse. Within the lineage of “private thinkers” (alongside Nietzsche and Kierkegaard), Shestov’s use of aphoristic style corresponds to the subversive strategy of a “thought from the outside” (as first Foucault and then Deleuze have termed the attempts at overcoming the Western metaphysical discourse and setting “the interiority of our philosophical reflection and the positivity of our knowledge”³ in relation to an irreducible exteriority). Some of Shestov’s assertions in *All Things Are Possible* (*The Apotheosis of Groundlessness*) fully justify D. H. Lawrence’s odd contention that Russia has been “infected” with the virus of European culture and has struggled to assimilate and overcome it before articulating its distinctive, if dissonant, message:

Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tartar. Culture is an age-long development, and sudden grafting of it upon a race rarely succeeds. To us in Russia, civilization came suddenly, whilst we were still savages. At once she took upon herself the responsibilities of a tamer of wild animals, first working with decoys and baits, and later, when she felt her power, with threats. We quickly submitted. In a short time we were swallowing in enormous doses those poisons which Europe had been gradually accustoming herself to, gradually assimilating through centuries.⁴

Subsequently, Shestov has often used the metaphor of the “savage,” ignorant dis-senter, epitomized by Dostoevsky’s “underground man,” to designate the resistance

to European civilization and its tradition of Greek speculative thought. From this perspective, Tertullian, the North African Christian apologist, belongs to the “savage” camp, along with maverick European personalities such as Luther, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, given that the tension between Athens and Jerusalem relates to an all-pervasive inner antinomy of speculative philosophy when confronted with biblical revelation. The process that led to the gradual suppression of the biblical strand of reflection in European culture is described by Shestov with reference to the “Hellenization of Christianity” started by Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE–50CE), a Jewish thinker and educator who strove to reconcile Greek philosophy and biblical exegesis in an attempt at emancipating the Jewish population and protecting their civil rights. As the apex of Jewish-Hellenic syncretism, Philo is diametrically opposed to Tertullian, whose view of the conflicting aims of the Greek and Jewish traditions focused on the Old Testament source of biblical revelation. The importance that Shestov attached, for instance, to the story of the Maccabees, the leaders of the successful Jewish revolt against the Hellenization of Judea,⁵ bears out well his defiant philosophical disengagement with Greek wisdom.

In *Athens and Jerusalem*, Tertullian’s contradictory statement “I believe because it is absurd” is referred back to its biblical source, and in particular to St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (14:23), which Shestov quotes in the foreword to bring out the opposition between Greek wisdom, according to which virtue is the “highest good,” and revelation, which condemns the speculative substitution of the living God with the moral idol, as well as any notion of salvation in the absence of faith:

The fundamental opposition of biblical philosophy to speculative philosophy shows itself in particularly striking fashion when we set Socrates’ words, “The greatest good of man is to discourse daily about virtue” (or Spinoza’s *gaudere vera contemplatione*—“to rejoice in true contemplation”) opposite St Paul’s words, “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.”⁶

In citing Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the Pauline conception of faith in the second part of *Athens and Jerusalem* (“the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith” and “the opposite of freedom is guilt”), Shestov sets into question the speculative interpretation of the Fall of Man from the point of view of Hegel’s philosophy. Given the absence of a genuine “critique of pure reason” within the history of modern thought, Shestov’s position consists in tracing back the fundamental link between knowledge and death to its origin in the story of Genesis (2:17):

The words that God addressed to Adam, “As for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die,” are in complete disagreement with our conception of knowledge as well as our conception of good and evil. But their meaning is perfectly clear and admits of no tortured interpretation. I repeat once more: they constitute the only true critique of pure reason that has ever been formulated here on earth. God clearly said to man that he must not put his trust in the fruits of the tree of knowledge, for they carry with them the most terrible dangers.⁸

The opposition between faith and knowledge does not refer in this case to the distinction between the virtue of obedience and the transgression that led to the fall, but signals the chasm that separates the freedom beyond good and evil before the fall and the condition of the man subjected to the laws of reason and ethics. In Shestov’s view, man traded his status as being created in God’s image, sharing in God’s creative power and divine free will, for the status of a slave to necessity:

The serpent said to the first man: “You shall be like God, knowing good and evil.” But God does not know good and evil. God does not *know* anything, God *creates* everything. And Adam, before his fall, participated in the divine omnipotence. It was only after the fall that he fell under the power of knowledge and at the same moment lost the most precious of God’s gifts—freedom. For freedom does not consist in the possibility of choosing between good and evil, as we today are condemned to think. Freedom consists in the force and power not to admit evil into the world.⁹

Similarly, in quoting a passage on the transient nature of knowledge from 1 Corinthians 13 in the preface to *Potestas Clavium*, Shestov traces back the tension between Athens and Jerusalem not to the polemics between Greek philosophers and Christian theologians (which marked the evolution of Western metaphysics throughout the early Middle Ages and beyond) but to its biblical sources:

If I speak the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. . . . Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease;

where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.¹⁰

The announced disappearance of knowledge, which will give way to *agape* (brotherly love or charity), the most important of the three Christian virtues (faith, hope, and charity), heralds the victory of Jerusalem over the wisdom of Athens. However, within the realm of temporal existence, the only vision that fallen man can have of transcendent reality is reminiscent of the shadows cast on the wall of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, and Shestov aptly comments in the first part of *Athens and Jerusalem* that "Plato would hardly need to change a single word to his myth of the cave. . . . The world would remain for him, 'in the light' of our 'positive' sciences, what it was—a dark and sorrowful subterranean region—and we would seem to him like chained prisoners."¹¹ In St Paul's words, the distance that separates man from the sources of truth after the fall alters the image of reality in the manner of an obscure reflection glimpsed in a mirror: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror [*per speculum in enigmate*—through a glass darkly]; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" [1 Corinthians 13:12].

The meaning of the apostle's analogy implies a complete reversal of our conception of knowledge and of our hierarchy of values, which is similar to Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values" and which occurs, according to Shestov, only at a time of great spiritual upheaval or in a limiting situation when all our certainties and hopes begin to crumble. The encounter with death, as well as any catastrophic event that undermines the foundation of our speculative reasoning, plays the role of a catalyst and an eye-opener. Shestov often makes reference to Tolstoy's *Master and Man* and *The Death of Ivan Ilitch* as an example of the radical transformation of convictions that the author himself had gone through. He talks about this process in his book *The Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche* (1900) but also in his article published on the great novelist's eightieth birthday and entitled "Destroyer and Builder of Worlds."¹² Published the year before Shestov's visit to Iasnaia Poliana, in 1910, this article analyzes the effects of the tragic experience that Tolstoy went through and of his two encounters with death, which led him to believe that "it suffices to know that God exist in order to live; and it suffices to forget him, no longer to believe in him, in order to die," or in other terms, that "faith is an intelligence of the meaning of life which prompts man not to destroy himself, but to live. Faith is the source of life."¹³

Shestov then cites a passage from Luther's *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* that he later mentions several times in *Potestas Clavium* and *Athens and Jerusalem*, concerning man's presumptuous belief in his self-justification,

or in other words, in his reason as a means of salvation, which God must break with a hammer. The *malleus Dei*, which falls on the foundation of autonomous ethics, on the principles of sufficient reason, as *bellua qua non occisa homo non potest vivere* (this beast without whose killing man cannot live),¹⁴ acts as a liberating force. As long as man remains a prisoner of appearances and places his trust in his ability to reach truth and find salvation “through reason alone,” divine grace intervenes in a paradoxically violent manner to smash and annihilate “the stubborn and impenitent beast,” whose archetype is none other than the serpent of the Bible, and the desire engendered by the fruits of the tree of knowledge. The meaning of the crisis and the transformation of convictions that Tolstoy, as well as Dostoevsky and Chekhov, have gone through at some point in their lives is thus related to the violent irruption of a transcendent force in personal existence. The sudden collapse of rational certainties is accompanied by a complete reversal of values resulting from the transgression of the limit posed to human temporal reflection. The article marking Tolstoy’s eightieth anniversary is preceded by a motto that takes on an immense significance in Shestov’s critique of scientific knowledge over the years and in his polemic with Husserl: “The time is out of joint”¹⁵ becomes the epitome of the sudden inner transformation that man experiences in contact with the radical alterity of God or in a limiting situation (extreme suffering, madness, death).

The idea of the liberating potential of near-death experiences runs through Shestov’s entire work from his article on Tolstoy to his first writings in exile, and in particular his landmark work on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky entitled “The Revelations of Death,”¹⁶ whose foreword alludes to the famous passage from Plato’s *Phaedo* (64A), to which Shestov returns in the first part of *Athens and Jerusalem*:¹⁷ “those who pursue philosophy study nothing but dying and being dead,” and whose motto is a quotation from Euripides: “Who knows if life is not death and death life?” According to Gorky’s recollection, it was with reference to Shestov’s book on the idea of the good that Tolstoy made his well-known remark about the source of genuine philosophical reflection (which resonates with Plato’s *meletê thanatou*—“practice for death”): “If only a man has learnt to think, whatever the object of his thoughts may be, he always thinks of his own death. It has been like this for all philosophers. And what truth can there be if there is death?”¹⁸ In *Athens and Jerusalem*, Shestov takes up the Platonic definition of philosophy as “practice for death” and makes it the focus of the preface and of the first part of his book, “Parmenides in Chains,” which deals with the absence of freedom within the realm of our rational experience of reality, and the possibility of “awakening” or acquiring a “second sight” through philosophical reflection, following a tragic descent into the depths of human despair:

But the philosopher who has arrived at the boundaries of life and passed through the school of death, the philosopher for whom *apothnêskein* (dying) has become the present reality and *tethnanai* (death) the reality of the future, has no fear of threats. He has accepted death and become intimate with it, for dying and death, by weakening the corporeal eye, undermine the very foundation of the power of Necessity, which hears nothing, as well as of the evident truths which depend on this Necessity. The soul begins to feel that it is given to it not to submit and obey but “to lead and govern.” [*Phaedo*, 80A] In fighting for this right it does not fear to pass beyond the fateful limit where what is clear and distinct ends and the Eternal Mystery begins. Its *sapientia* (wisdom) is no longer a *meditatio vitae* (meditation on life) but a *meditatio mortis* (meditation on death).¹⁹

Death, which forces man to abandon the well-trodden path of rational analysis and wander off into the underground or the desert, acts in the same violent and paradoxical manner as the *malleus Dei*: it both destroys man’s self-righteousness and restores his freedom. As in the legend of the Angel of Death, which Shestov mentions in the first part of his book on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy,²⁰ man is endowed with a second pair of eyes following the limiting experience of a near-death experience. The courage or the paradoxical weakness needed to accept the destruction of one’s old world and the birth of a new vision of reality (a process that Tolstoy captures in his description of Brekhunov’s death in *Master and Man*) is in fact the source of a transformation that closely resembles the terrifying, yet marvellous, metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly:

But in Tolstoy, just as in Plato and Plotinus, the thought of death is accompanied by a particular sentiment, by a kind of consciousness that, even while horror rose before them, wings were growing in their backs. Probably something similar happens with the chrysalis when it begins to gnaw at its cocoon. It gnaws because it is growing wings.²¹

If, as Shestov remarked, “the entire history of philosophy, and philosophy itself, should be and often has been simply a ‘wandering through human souls,’”²² death is not a value in itself, and the author of “The Revelations of Death” opposed the philosophies of finitude, which define being in relation to its temporal limitation and, consequently, freedom as *Freiheit zum Tode* (freedom toward death).

In attempting to reverse the rational judgment of living beings as inessential and linked to inevitable destruction, Shestov traces Tertullian’s remarks on

the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ back to their biblical source, and to the prophet Isaiah and Saint Paul's refusal to reconcile Greek wisdom (Athens) and revelation (Jerusalem).²³ The Christian allegory of the chrysalis that depicts the paradoxical destruction leading to the liberation of the soul after death takes on the meaning of a profound transformation of beliefs (similar to Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values"), whereby an individual reverses his judgement of Greek wisdom as "the highest good" and discovers the self-affirming power of "madness" and biblical revelation as source of truth. In discussing Nietzsche's attacks on classical metaphysics and epistemology, Shestov does not hesitate to relate Luther's interpretation of *malleus Dei* to the notion of "philosophizing with a hammer," and goes as far as to say, "Does not then Nietzsche's *Will to Power* express under another form Luther's *sola fide*?"²⁴ For it is the human will that has been paralyzed by the drive toward knowledge, and it is the will that needs to be freed by the destructive-creative intervention of an alternative type of thinking—the "philosophy of tragedy" (in Shestov's terms) or "philosophy with a hammer" (according to Nietzsche). "A great struggle awaits us," Nietzsche wrote with reference to the Eternal Return. "For it is required a new weapon, the hammer, to bring on a terrible decision" (*The Will to Power* §1054).²⁵ Breaking the causal connection between events and overcoming temporal irreversibility is the actual aim of the thought of Eternal Return, and not the endless mechanical repetition of the same, as Shestov pointed out in comparing Nietzsche's and Luther's revolt against the idolatry of reason and autonomous ethics:

Behind Nietzsche's Eternal Return is hidden, it seems, a force of infinite power that is also prepared to crush the horrible monster who rules over human life and over all being: Luther's *Creator omnipotens ex nihilo faciens omnia*. The omnipotent creator is not only beyond good and evil but also beyond truth and falsehood. Before his face (*facie in faciem*), both evil and falsehood cease to exist and are changed into nothingness, not only in the present but also in the past. They no longer are and never have been, despite all the testimonies of the human memory.²⁶

Philosophy, as "the second dimension of thought" according to Shestov, is not the disinterested contemplation of the impersonal laws that dictate the conditions of being, but an actual fight against the "supernatural enchantment and slumber" (as Pascal qualified it) that has taken over the human mind after the fall:

Religious philosophy is not the search for the eternal structure and order of immutable being; it is not reflection (*Besinnung*); it is not an understanding of the difference between good and evil. . . . Religious philosophy is the final supreme struggle to recover original freedom and the divine *valde bonum* (very good) which is hidden in that freedom and which, after the fall, was split into our powerless good and our destructive evil.²⁷

From the point of view of the existential critique of the ethical foundation of speculative thought, Lev Shestov's final work can be ultimately understood as an essay devoted to the question of freedom. In terms of its elaboration and structure, *Athens and Jerusalem* is an argumentative and stylistic *tour de force* that effortlessly combines more discursive, historical forms of exegesis and shorter, aphoristic fragments, strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche. The preface, as often is the case, was written last, in April 1937. As Shestov himself explained: "A foreword is basically always a post-word. This book, developed and written over a long period of time, is at last finished. The foreword now seeks to formulate as briefly as possible what has given direction to the author's thought over the course of several years."²⁸ The short introductory essay, entitled "Wisdom and Revelation," is indeed a synthesis of the arguments in Shestov's major preceding works of the exile period (namely, *Potestas Clavium*, *In Job's Balances*, and *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy*). The epigraph to the foreword, composed of two citations from Plato (*Apology*, 38A) and Saint Paul (Romans, 14:23), encapsulates the opposition between Greek wisdom and biblical revelation that provides the guiding thread for the ensuing "essay in religious philosophy." In refusing to reduce the essential interrogation over the meaning of life to a question of moral justification, Shestov chooses to oppose faith and knowledge, while recalling the distance that has always separated "the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob" from the "God of philosophers." The power to suspend the reign of immutable ethical principles and to transcend temporal irreversibility belongs to the Creator alone and remains inaccessible to the idol with which human morality and reason have replaced the Living God. Shestov thus refers the notion of "created truth" to Peter Damian's conception that "God could bring it about that that which had been had not been." And from this point of view, not only the fall of man but the entire

history of humanity—or, more precisely, all the horrors of the history of humanity—is, by one word of the Almighty, "annulled"; it ceases to exist . . . : Peter did not deny; David cut off Goliath's head but was not an adulterer; the robber did not kill; Adam did not taste the forbidden fruit.²⁹

In his preliminary study of Tertullian's work, Shestov drew attention to the significance of the rift between knowledge and life which was clearly brought to light by the first pages of Genesis: "Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?"—Tertullian exclaimed—and, of course, he was right: the truth of Athens has not been reconciled and cannot be reconciled with the truth of Jerusalem, in the same way in which the fruits of the tree of knowledge of good and evil could only block man's access to the tree of life."³⁰

In the first part of the volume, "Parmenides in Chains (On the Sources of Metaphysical Truths)," Shestov focused precisely on the link between knowledge and man's loss of freedom. The elaboration of this long section of the book starts in 1926, when Shestov was writing *In Job's Balances*. The essay on Parmenides initially was intended for a series of conferences at the University of Frankfurt and at the Kant-Gesellschaft in Halle in 1930. It was first published in French in the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* (July–August 1930, no. 7/8), then in Russian, as a brochure, with YMCA-Press, in 1931.

The first chapter of "Parmenides in Chains" deals with the same topic as the last two aphorisms in *Athens and Jerusalem* ("Looking Backwards" and "Commentary on That Which Precedes"), which in turn correspond to the philosophical debate between Shestov and Husserl. If, from Shestov's point of view, "philosophy is a struggle, the ultimate struggle" for recovering the freedom before the fall and the sources of life opposed to the knowledge of good and evil, according to Husserl "philosophy is reflection" on the foundation of scientific truth. In June 1930 Shestov gave a paper on this topic to the Nietzsche-Gesellschaft, which was published, alongside fourteen aphorisms from *Athens and Jerusalem*, under the title "Kampf und Besinnung" [Fight and reflection] in the magazine *Neue Rundschau* in October 1930.

Shestov and Husserl met for the first time at a conference in Amsterdam, in 1928, and then at regular intervals over the following decade. In the obituary³¹ that Shestov completed in 1938, only a couple of months before he himself died, the author of *Athens and Jerusalem* remembers that, despite their radically opposed views on the sources of truth and the aims of philosophy, Husserl recommended "Parmenides in Chains" for publication in the prestigious German periodical *Logos*.³² Echoes of their initial debate and of their ensuing discussion during Husserl's visit to the Sorbonne in 1929 (which Shestov helped organize) resonate through the inaugural lecture that Heidegger gave the same year at the University of Freiburg, entitled "Was ist Metaphysik?" [What is metaphysics?]. The meetings and correspondence between Shestov, Husserl, and Heidegger at this time are particularly important for the elaboration of Shestov's book on Kierkegaard and existential philosophy (first published in 1936), whose

problematics is equally evoked in the second part of *Athens and Jerusalem*. According to Shestov's recollection of his first meeting with Heidegger in Freiburg, in 1928, their discussion turned around aspects of the existential critique of speculative thought, which the author of *Being and Time* had borrowed from Kierkegaard (something which Shestov ignored as he had not yet read the Danish philosopher):

When I met Heidegger at Husserl's, I quoted a few of his texts which, as I thought, ought to have shattered his system. I was absolutely certain. I had no idea then that these texts reflected Kierkegaard's influence and that Heidegger's input consisted in his determination to fit these ideas into the Husserlian framework. After Heidegger left, Husserl approached me and *made me promise* that I would read Kierkegaard. I couldn't understand *why* he was so adamant about it—Kierkegaard's thought has nothing to do with Husserl's, and I don't think Husserl even liked him. Today I think that he probably wanted me to read Kierkegaard so I may *better understand* Heidegger.³³

In the first part of *Athens and Jerusalem*, Shestov brings out the contrast between two conceptions of truth, with reference to their positioning in relation to the famous equivalence which Parmenides first established between being and thought (εἶναι—einai and νοεῖν—noein):

Philosophy has always meant and wished to mean reflection, *Besinnung*, looking backward. Now it is necessary to add that "looking backward," by its very nature, excludes the possibility and even the thought of struggle. "Looking backward" paralyzes man. He who turns around, who looks backward, must see what already exists, that is to say, the head of the Medusa; and he who sees Medusa's head is inevitably petrified, as the ancients already knew. And his thought, a petrified thought, will naturally correspond to his petrified being.³⁴

Contrary to Hegel's conception, which draws on the equivalence between being and thought established by Parmenides, religious philosophy starts from the premise that being is not "situated entirely and without residue on the level of reasonable thought,"³⁵ and that the fight against self-evidences aims to retrieve the "irrational residue of being"³⁶ that the entire history of speculative thought has sought to obliterate—that is, the living individual as well as the living God.

The title of the second part of *Athens and Jerusalem*, “In the Bull of Phalaris,” refers to the story of Phalaris (570–540BCE), the tyrant of Agrigento (in Sicily), whose reputation of extreme cruelty was derived from the punishment he devised for his victims, who were roasted alive by being shut in a brazen bull, beneath which a fire was kindled. In Shestov’s philosophical argument, the criticism of the Stoical attitude, which advises the calm contemplation of all misfortunes and suffering, often points to the remarks on self-restraint and endurance in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7. Stoicism is contrasted with Job’s revolt, and his decision to confront God while refusing to accept the unjust suffering he is condemned to endure. “The second part, the most difficult, as Shestov remarks in the Foreword, reveals the indestructible bond between knowledge, as philosophy understands it, and the horrors of human existence.”³⁷

Written in 1931, the essay on knowledge and freedom, “In the Bull of Phalaris,” bears out Shestov’s decisive encounter with Kierkegaard’s work. The last three chapters in the second part of *Athens and Jerusalem* correspond to Shestov’s first article on the Danish philosopher, which was also included in a slightly modified version in the central section of *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, where Shestov writes:

Kierkegaard asked that men imitate Christ in their own lives, and seek from life, not joy, but sorrow. The Greek *katharsis* could be summed up, without exaggeration, as an imitation of Socrates, and the Greeks taught of the wise man’s bliss in the bull of Phalaris.³⁸

The meditation on necessity and freedom in *Athens and Jerusalem* leads to a surprising parallel interpretation of Nietzsche’s and Kierkegaard’s conceptions in light of Luther’s critique of dogmatic theology. If Nietzsche’s notions of the Eternal Return and “the will to power” seem to abolish necessity and recover the free will of the *Creator omnipotens*, in agreement with Luther’s own view of salvation, it is nevertheless apparent that any attempt at providing a speculative foundation to such unsystematic, subversive reflections on time and self-awareness prompts a return to ethical reasoning, and to “amor fati”:

And Nietzsche could not escape the fate of all; the idea of Necessity succeeded in seducing him also. He bowed his own head, and called all men to prostrate themselves, before the altar or throne of the “monster without whose killing man cannot live.”³⁹

Kierkegaard's similar evolution, from his initial faith in the Absurd (which he took up from Tertullian), to his later submission to Socratic ethical principles, brings out the fallen man's inability to save himself as he "puts all his trust in knowledge, while it is precisely knowledge that paralyzes his will and leads him inexorably to his downfall."⁴⁰ The existential philosopher, according to Shestov, should aspire to think in the categories in which he lives, rather than constantly strive to do the opposite. Autonomous ethics renders the idea of God in man's image, that is to say within the bounds of bare reason. From Luther's point of view, *de servo arbitrio* [the bondage of the will] concerned only man, whereas "for Kierkegaard, as for Socrates and Spinoza, *de servo arbitrio* extends likewise to God."⁴¹ The second part of *Athens and Jerusalem* was initially published in several issues of the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, from January to April 1933.

The elaboration of the third part of *Athens and Jerusalem*, concerning the philosophy of the Middle Ages, dates back to 1934 and reflects Shestov's interest in the work of Etienne Gilson, following from the analysis he devoted to dogmatic theology and to its relationship to speculative philosophy in *Potestas Clavium*. In the Foreword, Shestov summarizes the intent of this section: "In the third part, [subtitled] 'Concupiscentia Invincibilis' [Invincible desire], the fruitless efforts of the Middle Ages to reconcile the revealed truth of the Bible with the Hellenistic truth are dealt with."⁴² The presence of a number of arguments that featured in Shestov's unfinished book on Plotinus, which he started writing in 1923 and partially published in the magazine *Versti* [Miles] in Paris, as well as in the Russian and German editions of his book *In Job's Balances*, printed in 1929, indicates the slow elaboration of a critique of the Greek heritage of medieval philosophy that gained momentum during the polemic with Jean Hering on the incompatibility between revelation and Husserl's phenomenological method. The possibility of a religious philosophy that breaks with the tradition of scholastic thought and decides to oppose Athens and Jerusalem consists in the decision to replace self-evident, immutable truth with the notion of "created truth," as Shestov argued:

Only such a philosophy can call itself Judaeo-Christian, a philosophy which proposes not to accept but to overcome the self-evidences and which introduces into our thought a new dimension—faith. . . . This is why the Judaeo-Christian philosophy can accept neither the fundamental problems nor the principles nor the technique of thought of rational philosophy.⁴³

Just as the difference between Descartes and Damian consisted in the former's dismay at offending reason (even when he admitted the possibility that God could have created man so that his limited understanding cannot allow for the existence of a mountain without a valley), Duns Scotus's and William of Occam's attacks against the edifice of Greek wisdom aimed to restore God's omnipotence without fear of the "wicked and lawless arbitrariness" of the rationally unknowable Creator. However, it was not until the Reformation that the extent to which Greek thought had taken over the medieval conception of faith and salvation fully came to light:

And yet Luther is strictly connected to the medieval philosophy, in the sense that the very possibility of his appearance presupposes the existence of a Judaeo-Christian philosophy which, setting as its task to proclaim the idea—hitherto unknown—of a created truth, continued to cultivate the fundamental principles and technique of the ancient thought.⁴⁴

The fourth and final part of *Athens and Jerusalem*, composed of sixty-six aphorisms in the German and French first editions of 1938, though including two more short texts in the posthumous Russian edition (YMCA-Press, 1951), was the first one to be elaborated, starting with 1925, as indicated by the date inscribed on the manuscript notebooks kept in the Shestov Archives at the Sorbonne. All the aphorisms in "The Second Dimension of Thought" were published in various magazines: in Russian in *Chisla* [Numbers], no. 1, 1930, and *Sovremennye zapiski* [Contemporary papers], no. 43, 1930; in French and English in *Forum philosophicum* (no. 1, 1930), which mainly gathered the aphorisms related to Shestov's polemic with Husserl. One of the two aphorisms which were not included in the French, English, and German editions of *Athens and Jerusalem*, entitled "The Choice," was also published in the same issue of *Forum philosophicum*. This is aphorism LXIV in the Russian edition, whose first few lines recall the opposition between the two originary myths of mankind, one which conceives individual life as illegitimate daring leading to inevitable destruction, the other which sets particular being under the protection of divine creation: "The appearance of man on earth is an impious audacity. God created man in His own image and likeness and, having created him, blessed him."⁴⁵ In fact the same text features twice, in slightly modified versions and with two different titles (LXIV "The Choice" and XXVIII "On the Sources of 'Conceptions of the World'"), in the Russian edition, whereas the English and the French editions include only the final version, which is also the most elaborate.⁴⁶

In contrasting the Greek myth of the origin of mankind (as illustrated by Anaximander's conception) and the biblical story of Genesis, Shestov highlights the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem or, more specifically, between the rational explanation of life and its source in God's creation. The same topic had been dealt with in the third part of *In Job's Balances*, which provides a critique of the Greek conception of the origin of evil as "audacious" and unforgivable birth of particular beings doomed to disappear in order to expiate their sin.⁴⁷ The biblical account of man's creation in God's image, of the advent of the God-Man, of his death and resurrection, proposes an alternative, soteriological view of individual existence after the fall, which is also present in Dostoevsky's often misunderstood writings:

Everyone is convinced, in fact, that Dostoevsky wrote only the several dozen pages devoted to starets Zosima, to Alyosha Karamazov, etc. and the articles in the *Journal of a Writer* where he explains the theories of the Slavophiles. As for *Notes from the Underground*, as for *The Idiot*, as for *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, as for the nine-tenths of all that constitutes the complete works of Dostoevsky—all that was not written by him but by a certain "personage with a regressive physiognomy"⁴⁸ and only in order to permit Dostoevsky to cover him with shame.⁴⁹

The only aphorism that was not reproduced in the English, French, or German editions of *Athens and Jerusalem* is entitled "The Fourth Gospel" and deals with the Hellenization of Christianity starting from the doctrine of the Logos, which finds its source in 1 John 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In *Potestas Clavium* Shestov had already exposed the speculative argument that led to the identification of God as Logos to reason and Greek wisdom, in line with the conception of Philo, the Hellenized Jew.⁵⁰ It is also noteworthy that this question played a significant part in Shestov's polemic with Jean Hering concerning the sources of truth and the object of philosophical enquiry. When the Protestant theologian quotes the "words of the Logos-Messiah" in order to underpin his defense of Husserlian phenomenology, Shestov replies:

It is true that God is called *logos* in the Gospel, but can the *logos* of the Gospel be equated with that of the philosophers? [. . .] Husserl's argument is based on self-evident truths; has it then a right to enlist the support of the Gospel commandments? Dostoevsky was able to take

the passage in Saint John (12:24) as motto for his *Brothers Karamazov*; but Dostoevsky is hardly a fitting mate for Husserl.⁵¹

The famous line in the Fourth Gospel about “the kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies,” which has a special place in Shestov’s work, crops up in a philosophical argument seemingly dominated by the rational, speculative grounding of faith. The conclusion of the aphorism devoted to the Gospel of John in the Russian edition of *Athens and Jerusalem* emphasizes the link between the conceptual approach to religion and the doctrine of the Logos:

And we must not forget that theologians draw mainly on the Fourth Gospel. Theology is a science of faith. But a science must prove its statements and, therefore, cannot do without rational arguments, or in other words, it reduces “revelation” to rational arguments: theology does not need God, but *verbum Dei* and *Deus dixit* [God’s word and God said].⁵²

It is also interesting to note Shestov’s significant and deliberate misquotation of a phrase he often liked to mention to Fondane as his “literary will.” In the preliminary drafts of the aphorism on the Fourth Gospel, Verlaine’s well-known “prends l’éloquence et tords-lui le cou” [take eloquence and break its neck] becomes “prends la raison et tords-lui son cou” [take reason and break its neck],⁵³ which aptly renders the equivalence between the “logos” and speculative discourse, or “eloquence” and “reason,” according to Shestov.

Athens and Jerusalem, Shestov’s posthumously published work, written during the last years of his life (and in the runup to World War II), enables the reader to appreciate the lasting impact his work had on the evolution of Continental philosophy and European literature in the twentieth century, given his interaction with major European writers (e.g., André Gide, Albert Camus, D. H. Lawrence, David Gascoyne, Thomas Mann) and his legacy on the post-war literary diaspora (Czeslaw Milosz and Joseph Brodsky).

In the anglophone world, Shestov became known even before he was forced into exile by the Bolshevik revolution in 1921, thanks to several translations published in London, Dublin, and Boston, which were prefaced by high-profile personalities of the time such as D. H. Lawrence and John Middleton Murry (a close friend of D. H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield’s husband). Three collections of articles came out in quick succession: *Anton Tchekhov and Other Essays* (published by Mansel & Co., in 1916), *Penultimate Words and Other Essays* (published by W. Luce, also in 1916), and *All Things Are Possible* (the first

translation of the volume originally entitled *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, published by Martin Secker in 1920, with an introduction by D. H. Lawrence). Shestov's work had a powerful influence on the British poet David Gascoyne, who was briefly associated with the Surrealist movement in Paris in the 1930s before becoming Fondane's close friend and disciple. Gascoyne later published a long essay on Shestov (in the magazine *Horizon* in 1946) and an account of his encounter with Fondane (and, indirectly, with Shestov's philosophy), which first came out in French in 1987, and was then collected in a volume of *Existential Writings* (published by Amate Press, Oxford, in 2001). Nevertheless, half a century passed between the first English translations of Shestov's essays in 1916 and the more recent editions of his works starting with *Chekhov and Other Essays* prefaced by Sidney Monas in 1966 (for the University of Michigan Press), and *Athens and Jerusalem*, which Bernard Martin edited and published with Ohio University Press the same year. From that moment on the list of available titles by Shestov from Ohio University Press grew steadily, reaching a peak in the late 1960s and mid-1970s, but suddenly coming to a halt in 1982—the year that *Speculation and Revelation* was published. Four decades after the last publication of a book by Shestov in English translation, most of his major works (such as *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche, In Job's Balances, Potestas Clavium*) have long been out of print.

The new edition makes once again available Shestov's masterpiece of religious existential philosophy, which is frequently referenced in Continental philosophy, religion, and interfaith studies. The recent renewal of interest in his work has been sparked by comparative studies in phenomenology, existentialism, and the philosophy of religion that have brought out Shestov's influence on the evolution of twentieth-century luminaries such as Albert Camus, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Emile Cioran, Leszek Kolakowski, Michel Henry, and Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze and Guattari brought to light Shestov's preeminent role in the postmodern attempt at breaking with the tradition of speculative thought and overcoming the limits of the scientific account of being, in order to establish a new type of thinking, most aptly defined as “the thought from the outside” or the “nomad thought”:

Noology, which is distinct from ideology, is precisely the study of images of thought, and their historicity. . . . But noology is confronted by counterthoughts, which are violent in their acts and discontinuous in their appearance, and whose existence is mobile in history. These are the acts of a “private thinker,” as opposed to the public professor: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, or even Shestov. Wherever they dwell, it is the

steppe or the desert. . . . “Private thinker,” however, is not a satisfactory expression, because it exaggerates interiority, when it is a question of outside thought. . . . There is another reason why “private thinker” is not a good expression. Although it is true that this counterthought attests to an absolute solitude, it is an extremely populous solitude, like the desert itself, a solitude already intertwined with a people to come, one that invokes and awaits that people, existing only through it, though it is not yet here.⁵⁴

Shestov’s solitary journey far from the beaten tracks of speculative discourse, across the wastelands of reason, presents the reader not so much with the riddle of a voice crying out in the desert, but with the call addressed to nomad thinkers and explorers who have, at different times, and in discontinuous yet persistent manner, set out in search of the impossible figure of an “eternal return” without repetition, outside of time.