New Encounters with Shestov

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Lev Shestov (1866–1938) has not attained a secure place on the contemporary philosophical map. Feted in his lifetime, his name is now more commonly spotted in the works of better-known writers who came into the orbit of the man or his works. In part, this lack of renown is due to the difficulty of fitting him to a specific audience among the factions of postwar philosophy. Shestov is often identified as a “religious existentialist,” but what this designation means in his case is the fusion of a radical skepticism with a profound religious sense and, clearly, one trait will often make Shestov less appealing to those who share the other. With the waning of existentialism’s cache, moreover, Shestov lost a certain currency, though he had little in common with a Jean-Paul Sartre in any case. Intriguing attempts have been made to link him with other “Jewish existentialists,” particularly Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, yet Shestov’s understanding of Judaism is too distant from that of the German Jews for this to be a solid affinity, and “Jewish existentialism” is not an entirely satisfactory rubric for any of these three thinkers.

Yet it is worthwhile to take another look at Shestov, and for precisely the reason which has set his so-called existentialism on the back-burner: the shifts in continental philosophy which began in the 1960s, and which replaced existentialism with post-structuralism as the philosophy du jour, and which made Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, rather than Sartre, the thinkers of the day. Today, Shestov’s radical skepticism lets us compare him to a different tradition of anti-idealist thought than the existentialist one: the anti-philosophies of French postmodernist thought. To be sure, he still does not fit in happily with contemporary deconstructionists. His dismantling of all philosophical edifices is no cool, linguistic play. It is an anguished religious quest, a casting away of all forms of idealism – indeed, of all moral and epistemological certainty and reassurance – in order to encounter the living God: unpredictable, irrefrangible, absurd. And yet Shestov’s stormy abolition of the rational presents us with an anti-philosophy whose affinities with contemporary postmodernisms deserve to be explored.

Moreover, through our postmodern lenses, Shestov shows up in connection with a different set of personalities than he had been linked with previously. Reputations have altered. Decades ago it seemed essential to point up the esteem in which he was held by D.H. Lawrence; today, the citations by Paul Celan may be of more import. For the purposes of this essay, we will look at the intellectual encounters
two thinkers had with Shestov, thinkers whose places within the postmodern canon are now unquestioned.

Georges Bataille (1897–1962), the novelist and theoretician of the sacred (meaning the violent limits of human erotic and spiritual life) is recognized as an important influence on the development of French poststructuralism. Thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Julia Kristeva, take him as a precursor. Between the wars – sometime before he broke with the Surrealists and began his experiments in “sacred sociology,” proposing that society could be transformed through the recreation of violent, sacral experiences – Bataille was the student of Shestov, an influence which, despite profound disagreements, never waned.¹

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) is the well-known German-Jewish literary critic who took his life when unable to escape Nazi-occupied France. Before fleeing Paris, Benjamin delivered a number of his manuscripts and sonnets, as well as a Paul Klee painting given him as a present by his closest friend, Gershom Scholem, into the safekeeping of Bataille, who hid them in the National Library where he worked.² Like Bataille, Benjamin had something of an encounter with Shestov, but he was no student. Benjamin’s rejection of Shestovian thought is nevertheless interesting for what it says about the development of his own, both in relation to his friend Scholem (an avid reader of Shestov) and to Parisian intellectual life.

In what follows, we will consider Bataille’s and Benjamin’s relations to Shestov, but first: a brief overview of Shestov himself.

**Athens and Jerusalem, in Paris**

Shestov often sounds like a character from the pages of a Dostoevsky novel. The antirationalism, the focus on absurdity and the fact of suffering, and the yearning for God portrayed by the Russian novelist find their discursive counterpart in the philosopher’s polemics against the tyranny of reason. Shestov wrote one book – a thunderous reenactment of the battle between Hellenistic rationality and Hebraic faith – and he wrote it over and over again. Despite his opposition to logos, Shestov was a polemicist, voluminously discursive and rarely gnomic or mysterious.

If the clarté of his writing appears to contradict the substance of his philosophy, it certainly seems to have helped his career as a professor in France. Born in 1866 into a well-off assimilated Jewish family in Kiev, Shestov left Russia with his family after the Revolution, going to Geneva and then to France where, in 1922, a year after his arrival, he was made professor of Russian letters at the University of Paris. He came quickly to

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² The relationship between Bataille and Benjamin is the subject of this author’s doctoral dissertation. See “Benjamin or Bataille: Transgression, Redemption, and the Origins of Postmodern Thought” (University of Washington, 1999) and the article, “The College of Sociology and the Institute for Social Research,” forthcoming in *New German Critique*.