

INTRODUCTION TO LEV SHESTOV'S ПАМЯТИ ВЕЛИКОГО ФИЛОСОФА¹

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Lev Shestov was born in 1866, in the city of Kiev, into the large family of a wealthy textile merchant. His father, the family patriarch, was an learned man and an Orthodox Jew. It was not easy to be his son. It was also not easy to come of age in the late Russian empire, amidst an archism and revolutionary Marxism, tsarist censors and secret policemen. Stefan Zweig described the last decades of Habsburg Vienna as an age of innocence. This could not be said of tsarist Kiev.

After he had finished his law studies, Shestov turned to Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, for whom philosophy could never be purified of history. And history – Shestov would come to argue – should teach us that there was no such thing as eternal laws. Life provided us with no grounding, he insisted. The task of philosophy was not to provide certainty, but rather to teach us to live in uncertainty.²

Perhaps for this reason Shestov was so captivated by Edmund Husserl's conviction that certainty could be had. When in 1912 his younger Kievan friend, Gustav Shpet, went to study in Göttingen, Shestov took great pleasure in meeting Husserl by proxy. He was eager to know more about the German philosopher who so firmly believed in absolute truth.

What did Husserl *himself*, *for himself* think about the anxieties expressed by Dostoevsky? How did Husserl's *Untersuchungen* relate to *these* kinds of disquietudes? “[I]f the occasion arises,” Shestov wrote to Shpet, “ask him what he thinks of Ibsen and Nietzsche. Perhaps in this way we'll finally lay our fingers on the key to his intuition. What is it that he needs it for? To save *Wissenschaft* or to open the path to what humans can attain?”³

For his part, Shpet suspected that Shestov deceived himself in his avowal of epistemological skepticism. Shpet wrote to his fiancée, Natal'ia Guchkova, that, despite all appearances, “I don't know anyone who is searching harder for, or is more desirous of finding, truth than he.”⁴

Husserl's promise of absolute truth had been for mankind since time immemorial what the Promised Land was for the Jews, wrote Shestov in the midst of the First World War.⁵ Shestov's 1917 “*Memento Mori*” was an impassioned attack on Husserl's epistemological

1 [In Russian: In a memory of a great philosopher]

2 Lev Shestov, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (trans. into English as *All Things are Possible* with an introduction by D. H. Lawrence), trans. S. S. Koteliansky (London: Martin Secker, 1920). Originally published in 1905 as *Апофеоз Беспочвенности*.

3 Shestov to Shpet, 11 July 1914, Сорпет. Густав Шпет, *Густав Шпет: жизнь в письмах* (Москва: ПОССПЭН, 2005), 332-333.

4 Quoted in Щедрина Т. Г., Пружинин Б. И., “Историзм Льва Шестова и Густава Шпета (об экзистенциальном изменении феноменологии)”, *Вопросы философии* no. 11 (2016).

5 Лев Шестов, «Мemento Мори.» *Вопросы философии психологии XXVIII*: 139-140 (1917); http://www.odinblago.ru/Memento_mori

utopianism. It was the kind of attack that could only have come from someone who had also been tempted. “Husserl desires no compromises,” wrote Shestov, “it is either all or nothing. Either *Evidenz* is the final destination towards which the human spirit strives as it seeks truth, and this *Evidenz* is reachable by human means, or a kingdom of chaos and madness is to reign on earth.”

For Shestov, precisely because the stakes were so high, it was essential to acknowledge this openly: reason could do much, but not all. In the face of certain *Grenzsituationen* reason showed itself to be impotent. Ultimately, essential truth – *истина* (a word for which there is no precise German equivalent) – lay beyond reason. Husserl, Shestov believed, did not confront *Grenzerfahrungen*; he remained in the middle zone of life, where reason could reach, and falsely extrapolated that this reachability must apply to the border zones as well. But such was not the case: “We must have the courage to tell ourselves firmly,” Shestov wrote:

the middle zones of human and universal life resemble neither the equator nor the poles... Rationalism’s ever-repeating error is its certainty of the limitless power of reason, *der Schrankenlosigkeit der objektiven Vernunft*. Reason has done so much, therefore reason can do everything. But ‘much’ does not mean ‘everything;’ ‘much’ is separated from ‘everything’ *tot coelo*; ‘much’ and ‘everything’ are absolutely incommensurate, belonging to two distinct, irreducible categories.”

In 1926, *Révue philosophique* published a French translation of “*Memento Mori*.” Jean Hering responded with an ardent defense of Husserl. Shestov responded to Hering. The exchange served in part to introduce France to Husserl. In fact Shestov was the first of four native Russian speakers – himself, Alexandre Koyré, *Alexandre Kojève*, and Emmanuel Levinas – who would serve as the mediators and translators, bringing phenomenology to France. The path from German to French led through Russian.

“Что немцам здорово—русским смерть,” Shestov was fond of saying.⁶ *What is healthy for Germans is fatal for Russians.*

Yet in a certain way Husserl was terribly close to a tradition of Russian philosophy, and Shestov recognized this: he was deeply moved by the profundity of Husserl’s attempt to attain clarity, by the depth of his honesty, by the way he philosophized with his whole being. It was something they shared.

Only in 1928, over a decade after Shestov had published “*Memento Mori*,” in Amsterdam, did the German philosopher and the Russian philosopher meet in person for the first time. This encounter developed into a friendship that was, for both men, one of the most meaningful in their lives. They argued about *Allgemeingültigkeit*, about the possibility of absolute truth. Yet they bore no animus towards each other; rather, something drew them together at once. They had both lost sons fighting in the First World War—on opposite sides. They had both devoted their lives to struggling with the problem of truth. It was Husserl who urged Shestov to read Kierkegaard.⁷ It was Shestov

6 А. Штейнберг, *Друзья моих ранних лет (1911-1928)* (Париж: Синтаксис, 1991), 222.

7 Bernard Martin, “The Life and Thought of Lev Shestov,” introduction to *Athens and Jerusalem* by Lev Shestov, trans. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).



Edmund Husserl

who initiated the Sorbonne's invitation to Husserl for the Paris lectures, which became the *Cartesian Meditations*.⁸

"*Verehrter Freund und Antipode!*" Husserl wrote to Shestov on 3 July 1929.

You know how seriously I take your attempts to open, for yourself and for all of us, a *Gotteswelt* in which one can actually live, and die – *even though* your paths can never become mine. Yet thoughts, as is the case with yours, which have their source in the deepest personal necessities, I take no less seriously than my own, about which I may say that they likewise pose for me an absolute must.⁹

Later Shestov told Benjamin Fondane that Husserl was the one person he would have thought incapable of understanding his questions – yet it turned out that Husserl was among the very few who truly did understand.¹⁰

Shestov died in Paris on 20 November 1938, just as he received the galleys of "*Памяти великого философа.*" It was the last text he ever wrote.

8 Husserl to Ingarden, Freiburg, 13. VII. 1928. Edmund Husserl, *Briefe an Roman Ingarden* (the Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 47.

9 Husserl to Shestov, 3. VII. 1929. Edmund Husserl, *Briefwechsel*, Band VI: Philosophenbriefe, ed. Elisabeth and Karl Schuman (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 371.

10 See Benjamin Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (Les Éditions Non Lieu, 2016).