

European Connections

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The Tragic Discourse

Shestov and Fondane's
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Introduction

The early reception of existential thought in France coincided with a significant rise of interest in anti-rationalist conceptions, under the impact of the unprecedented destruction of human lives and senseless atrocities of the trenches during the First World War. The collapse of the old theological values, coupled with a loss of faith in the progressive and purposeful character of history led to a radical re-evaluation of the meaning of existence. Among the decisive influences that shaped the ideology of a whole new generation of French intellectuals in the inter-war period, one must account for the perceived convergence between emerging theories of the absurd and Nietzsche's fateful pronouncements in *The Gay Science*.¹

The appropriation of Jarry's provocative illogicality by the avant-garde during the 1910s and 1920s echoed the wider recognition of a spiritual *malaise* and of a sense of impending crisis, following the 'death of God'. However, the critique of the old humanist tradition that accompanied the advent of the Dada and Surrealist movements was taken one step further by the radical dismantling of the rationalist foundation of knowledge in the works of Lev Shestov (1866–1938) and Benjamin Fondane (1898–1944). The collapse of the established theological and moral arguments that prompted the two authors' investigation into the meaning of life opened up the horizon of a post-metaphysical hermeneutics whose religious inflection sparked inevitable controversies with Surrealism, and later on, with the atheist strands of French Existentialism.

While sharing in the general revival of notions of the absurd and the call for a Nietzschean 'transvaluation of all values', Shestov and Fondane's existential thought occupied a solitary position among competing

1 First published in 1882, but translated into French only in 1901. For further details on Nietzsche's early reception in France, see: Jacques Le Rider, *Nietzsche en France: De la fin du XIXe siècle au temps présent*, Paris: P.U.F., 1999.

philosophical strands in the first half of the twentieth century. Given the particular connection between Dostoevsky's and Nietzsche's positions on morality and religion that Shestov highlighted for the first time in his study of the 'philosophy of tragedy',² it can be said that existential thought went against the predominant scientific drive of its time, and inaugurated a type of enquiry in which literary and philosophical concerns and styles of writing were allowed to interact and blend freely. Nietzsche's use of aphorisms and metaphors, no less than Dostoevsky's fictional framing of metaphysical questions in *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Notes from the Underground*, became the inspirational landmarks for a re-configuration of philosophical language whose consequences reached far beyond Shestov's existential thought to determine the post-war evolution of French speculative writing from Sartre to Deleuze and Derrida.

Although less known than Nietzsche's first French biographer, Daniel Halévy, Shestov was equally instrumental in shaping Nietzsche's early reception in France.³ Some writers, such as Bataille, first came into contact with the German philosopher's thought by way of Shestov's critical interpretations.⁴ Interestingly, this must also be the case for Dostoevsky's early reception in France, as most available accounts on this topic often mention Shestov's works. The pervasive, though rarely acknowledged, influence of existential thought on a significant number of writers and philosophers (such as Gide, Malraux, Bataille, Camus, Deleuze – to name but a few) can best be measured in relation to the ideological debates occasioned by Shestov and Fondane's works from the 1920s onwards. Any attempt at re-tracing this polemical context brings into view the crucial role that the interpretation of tragic experience

2 Léon Chestov, *La Philosophie de la tragédie: Dostoïevski et Nietzsche*, trans. Boris de Schloezer, Paris: Editions de la Pléiade, 1926. The Russian original of the book was first published in St Petersburg, in 1903.

3 See, for example, Jacques Le Rider's study, *Nietzsche en France: De la fin du XIXe siècle au temps présent*, Paris: P.U.F., 1999, pp. 133–4, 139, 141, 194.

4 Georges Bataille (together with Tatiana Beresovki-Shestov) translated Shestov's study of Tolstoy and Nietzsche, *L'Idée du bien chez Tolstoï et Nietzsche: Philosophie et prédication* (Paris: Editions du Siècle, 1925). For Shestov's influence on Bataille, see Michel Surya's comprehensive study, *Georges Bataille: La Mort à l'œuvre* (Paris: Librairie Séguier, Editions Garamont, Frédéric Birr, 1987, pp. 67–74).

played in existential thought. No other line of argument pertaining to the absurd polarised opinion more or had a longer lasting appeal to post-war critics and readers worldwide.

The present volume examines the elaboration of the existential discourse, in the light of the subtle interweaving of Dostoevsky's and Nietzsche's conceptions of tragedy. The third significant philosophical reference of the existential line of thought can be traced back to Kierkegaard's writings, which had a major influence on French Existentialism (especially on Camus's and Sartre's works). The papers gathered in this volume represent the proceedings of the first joint international conference of the Shestov and Fondane Societies, organised at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, in 2000. Several original articles have been added to complement the existing contributions to the conference and provide an in-depth analysis of Shestov's and Fondane's works, according to four main areas of investigation: (1) the tragic experience in existential thought; (2) the sources of Shestov's and Fondane's subversive discourse on reason; (3) literary interpretations; and (4) contemporary debates.

Starting from an outline of Shestov's philosophy, the first part of the volume focuses on the existential understanding of tragedy with reference to a series of issues (such as religious faith, the absurd, scientific evidence and truth), as well as a number of decisive encounters that marked both Shestov's and Fondane's conception of morality and human existence. Alexis Philonenko sheds light on the relationship between Shestov and Luther through a compelling re-assessment of *Sola Fide* (Shestov's unfinished work dating back to 1913–1914, and published for the first time in the posthumous French edition of 1957). The second chapter analyses Shestov and Fondane's account of the absurd from the perspective of their critique of rationalist arguments concerning ethics and the concept of time. Ricardo Nirenberg considers the mathematical and philosophical implications of Dostoevsky's provocative statement in *Notes from the Underground* concerning the truth of ' $2 \times 2 = 4$ '. Michaela Willeke and Michael Finkenthal provide different interpretations of the tension between rationality and faith that defined the existential conception of the tragic. William Desmond concentrates on the recurrent motifs of 'sleep' and 'awakening' in Shestov's work, by drawing on the existential exegeses of Plotinus, Shakespeare and Pascal. Dominique Guedj comments on Fondane's account of 'tragic experience' in *La Conscience malheureuse*, with reference to Shestov's notion

of 'discontinuity' and its analogous formulations in the works of Lévy-Bruhl and Lupasco.

The second part of the volume examines some of the most significant literary and philosophical sources of existential thought, through a series of comparative studies. The subtle correlation between the philosopher's lived experience and his thought is brought to light in Andrea Oppo's remarks on the transition between Shestov's first published work on Shakespeare and his later elaboration of a 'philosophy of tragedy'. Olivier Salazar-Ferrer and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal reassess Nietzsche's influence on Fondane's and Shestov's conception of tragedy. Nicole Hatem compares and contrasts Kierkegaard's and Shestov's interpretations of tragedy and 'tragic experience', by focusing on a range of distinctive themes of reflection in existential thought: death, despair, anxiety, destiny, necessity and freedom. Geneviève Piron situates Shestov in the context of the early twentieth-century Russian philosophy and literature, with particular reference to Viatcheslav Ivanov.

The contributions gathered in the third part of the volume offer close readings of the relationship between literature and philosophical discourse in Shestov's and Fondane's works. Romain Vaissermann explores the formal and semantic underpinnings that determined Shestov's adoption of the aphorism, in the wake of existential predecessors such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Anne Van Sevenant highlights the interaction between two 'languages' (poetry and metaphysics) in Fondane's existential thought. Fondane's use of poetry as an alternative means of expression for his conception of tragedy elicits a new comparative interpretation in Gisèle Vanhese's paper that draws an interesting parallel with the thinking of modern theorists such as Bachelard and Gilbert Durand. Mircea Martin examines Fondane's first articles on Shestov, published before the two exiled writers actually met in 1924, in Paris. Eric Freedman discusses Fondane's re-casting of ancient Greek and biblical characters in his tragic plays, inspired by Shestov's existential philosophy.

The final section is devoted to the intellectual encounters and controversies that defined the reception of Shestov and Fondane's thought in the first half of the twentieth century. Monique Jutrin evokes the charismatic figure of the philosopher and critic Rachel Besspaloff, whose work, influenced by her polemic dialogue with Shestov and Fondane, is about to be re-discovered in France, following a long period of silence. Peter

Christensen considers the impact of Shestov's ideas on the fictional writing of his life-long friend and French translator, Boris de Schloezer. Camille Morando re-traces the evolution of George Bataille's relationship with Shestov, and comments on the sources of their spiritual affinity that seemed to end in disagreement during the mid-1920s, only to re-surface, as a muted yet pervasive reference, in works such as *Le Coupable* and *L'Expérience intérieure*.

Despite the scarce direct references to Shestov's and Fondane's thought in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the persistence over the last few decades of an interest in speculative argumentation on the boundaries of reason, often coupled with a peculiar blending of literary and philosophical styles of writing, bears witness to the impact of the existential revival of notions of subjective experience, of the absurd and of a transgressive quest for meaning. This collective volume fills an important gap in twentieth-century literary and philosophical studies, by providing a range of interpretative approaches to Existentialism, its origins and evolution from the early 1920s to its post-war manifestations. It is hoped that the current re-assessment of Shestov's and Fondane's 'tragic discourse' will generate an opinion-changing understanding of philosophy at the crossroads between traditionally distinct domains of enquiry such as literary criticism and metaphysics, (auto)biographical writing and theology, history of ideas and fiction, psychology and ethics.