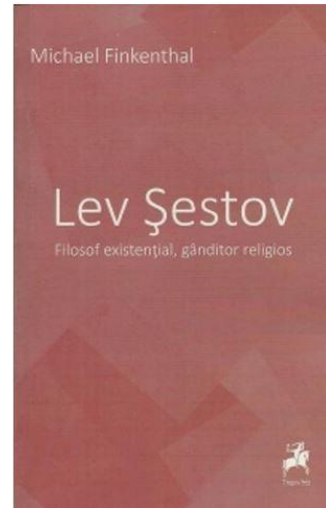


Michael Finkenthal, *Lev Şestov. Filosof existenţial, gânditor religios*, translation by Roxana Sorescu, Editura Tracus Arte, Bucharest, 2014.

By Ariana Guga

Since the beginning of time, literature and philosophy have been entwined in different and even surprising ways, allowing mankind to discover its roots. As a consequence, history is filled with numerous thinkers and writers who tried both paths in order to bring their most intimate and innovative ideas to life.



In his book, *Lev Şestov. Filosof existenţial, gânditor religios* (Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker), Michael Finkenthal creates the portrait of an intricate mind that branched out into religion, philosophy and literature. As a researcher who takes an interest in natural sciences as well as in the cultural and political life, Finkenthal wrote numerous essays and articles about authors such as Eugen Ionesco, Emil Cioran and Benjamin Fondane. It should come as no surprise that Lev Shestov triggered the author's interest, and as it will be shown in the next pages, Finkenthal reshapes the world of Shestov without criticism or preconceived ideas.

Throughout its thirteen chapters, Finkenthal creates a pattern of concepts and interior turmoil which ultimately define and explain the life and work of Lev Shestov. The appeal of Finkenthal's approach consists in the author's understanding of the elements that ultimately lead to the work Shestov left behind. Not only the reader has access to extended interpretations of Shestov's works, but he can also follow his thought process thanks to the ability with which Finkenthal reveals a series of personal event from Shestov's life.

Along with the themes presented by the author, he also emphasizes Shestov's creative essence which had deep, personal roots, and its purpose was beyond everything else reaching a sense of hope and even spiritual belonging. Shestov was greatly influenced by his religious roots, a political

climate filled with anxiety and instability, but above all Finkhental proves that Shestov's sufferings paved the way to religion and ultimately hope.

The philosophical trap

Caught between the Russian and European culture and a Judaic upbringing, Shestov has also benefited from the influence of great thinkers, whether they were philosophers or writers or both. Kant, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy are just some of the great personalities that initiated a thought process that would last a life time. The first part of the book emphasizes how difficult it is to mark the distinction between philosopher and religious thinker, terms used often by Finkhental. What can be considered a dramatic turn of events is that when philosophy and even poetry fail to answer the questions raised by the intimate sufferings of Shestov, he turns to religion, and most specifically to the Bible, as it will be shown in the following pages.

Among the prevalent themes that Finkhental chose, the political context can be easily considered a supporting character, since it was the catalyst of some of the greatest events and encounters of Shestov's life. As a matter of fact, Finkhental also suggests that economy and politics were also topics of interest for Shestov; he studied Marx and he had quite a revolutionary spirit, a trait that becomes important since he was kidnapped in his early teens.

Quite simply put, philosophy played a major role in Shestov's life, both personally and professionally, but even so there is a question that somehow remains unanswered: was Shestov a philosopher or did he find in philosophy the guidance that he needed to become a religious thinker? As it will be shown further on, Finkhental tries to offer an answer, but only the reader can be the judge of its validity.

A matter of politics

Throughout the book Finkhental pays little attention to the political context, something that can be considered both a blessing and a curse for the reader. Shestov's private life is seen by Finkhental as a painful and traumatic launching pad towards religion, but it can be hard for an inexperienced reader to grasp the major role played by politics in Shestov's life. It is because of the political context that he moved to Geneva and then Paris, major changes that had a big influence on his work and his relationships.

The anticipation of the Russian Revolution coincided with a strenuous process that would also have an impact on the way that religion would be perceived by Shestov and also by others from his generation. The great divide between Judaism and the European culture is not a theme in itself, but it creates the image of a perpetual struggle that Shestov felt, a struggle that expanded from the inside to the outside.

Between a rock and a hard place

Beyond everything else, Finkhental's greatest accomplishment comes from his understanding of Shestov's emotional state. Without this particular element brought by the author it would be virtually impossible to grasp the meaning of his work. Also, Finkhental creates a suitable environment even for those who are not familiarized with Shestov. By offering the public a keen analysis of the author's books and life, Finkhental introduces in a non aggressive manner the topic of religion.

Although obvious from the early pages of the book, Shestov's legacy as a Jew contributed to many interpretations and ideas, some of them supported by others and some that needed to be defended by the author. What Finkhental is determined to show is that Shestov's desired above everything else to discover the truth, no matter the paths that he had to follow.

In his search for the truth, Shestov uses a series of elements borrowed from logic, but as Finkhental observes, ethics and moral dilemmas regarding right and wrong are not Shestov's topics of choice. Obviously there is room for interpretation, but it is crucial for the reader to understand the motives that drove Shestov to embark on such a difficult task.

His personal turmoils and even failures, as well as his complicated if not strenuous relationship with his family, and especially with his father are the roots of his need to find the truth. Consequently, Shestov turned his attention to the only place that could give him comfort and answers: God.

Still, as Finkhental suggests, Shestov's journey meant breaking a lot of personal limits. This caused a series of controversies, but Shestov's perspective came as a result of an entire generation caught between Judaism and Europe, a paradigm also suitable for the political climate.

Finkhenthal focuses his attention on two major aspects that define Shestov as a religious thinker.

First of all, Shestov became preoccupied with the roots of the original sin, the Old and the New Testament and the profound meaning of the forbidden fruit. Finkhenthal spares no efforts to present and analyze every aspect of Shestov's perspective. Having in mind the thinker's Judaic background Finkhenthal suggests an approach that values it and gives it meaning. Shestov, always in search of hope and truth reunited Jews and Christians under the same God, thus interpreting the original sin with the help of Kabala.

Second of all, Shestov followed his own ideals and transferred them into Christianity, which meant a form of Judaism that Shestov found in the Bible. As stated before, the question of whether Shestov was a philosopher or a religious thinker becomes even more present, especially because philosophy supported and may have also inspired Shestov as a religious thinker.

Throughout the book Finkhenthal shapes not only a vision of Judaism and Christianity, but also a vision of hope under the pressure of personal pain and need. The reader can experience a sense of immersion and empathy, since it isn't so far fetched to assume that everyone or almost everyone is in search of hope and personal answers.

Beyond Russia

Shestov's journey continues beyond the Russian revolution and brings him to Paris where he is faced with a different world and different people. Martin Buber and Benjamin Fondane are probably the most important people he meets, especially since Shestov's relationship with Fondane will grow in time and develop into a master-disciple bond.

However, Shestov's relationship with Russia does not end; he maintains the connections forged with old friends and intellectuals, but they are merely frames of a much larger picture. It's interesting how Shestov's religious dilemma never ceased to follow him. In a way, Shestov's personal and professional journey can be representative for an entire generation. He found hope in God, but he never escaped his Jewish legacy, he rather tried to find a Jewish meaning in Christianity and vice versa.

Despite Finkhental's best efforts to solve Shestov's puzzle, there is a strong possibility that he will forever remain in the reader's mind somewhere between philosophy and religion. Still, the author pens out a subtle way to reassure readers that it doesn't matter where we place Shestov because one side doesn't eliminate the other.

The last part of the book can be characterized best by using the word "hover". It suggests loyalty and responsibility, and Michael Finkhental represents these concepts in the last pages of the book where he tries to offer an extended version of some the ideas presented throughout the book as well as the impact Shestov had on the Romanian society. It is a much needed addendum for readers, although it also represents a paradox. On one hand those pages offer explanation, but on the other hand they also deepen the already existing doubts.

Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker is a book build on the basis of a puzzle: it unravels itself gradually, creating a sense of anticipation. Finkhental manages to create a system of beliefs that governed Shestov's life, and that ultimately transformed itself into a legacy.

Somewhere between Judaism and Christianity, faith and despair, Finkhental draws a transparent line between philosophy and religion, which is why Lev Shestov remains in a cultural and spiritual limbo. The chains of desolation and suffering that imprisoned Shestov could not be broken with the help of philosophy or poetry. Religion became a haven where Lev Shestov found hope, something that he treasured more than the line between what's morally right or wrong.

As stated before, Finkhental did not plan to introduce readers to political details or to an analysis of the Russian context, but he did paint an accurate picture of Shestov's background, a blend of religion, politics and European spirit. Also, Finkhental emphasizes the influence of great personalities coming from literature, philosophy and religion.

It is almost impossible to read Michael's Finkhental book without feeling a connection to Shestov's turmoil. It is true that the interpretations given to the original sin and the Bible can be criticized by experts, but overall Finkhental transmits a sense of humanity. In the end Lev Shestov was a great thinker, whether some choose to see him on the side of philosophy or

religion, and also he was a traveler, because Finkhental's book is a journey of hope and faith, and everyone can relate to such powerful motivations.