

# The Tyrant Necessity

*Athens and Jerusalem*, by Lev Shestov, translated from the Russian by Bernard Martin (Ohio University Press. 447 pp. \$7.50), attacks reason, logic, and knowledge as enslaving forces, and maintains that Biblical faith is the means of liberation. Will Herberg, graduate professor of philosophy and culture at Drew University, is the author of "Judaism and Modern Man" and "Protestant-Catholic-Jew."

By WILL HERBERG

ALMOST every philosopher in the Western tradition has maintained that his teaching would prove a liberating force in man's intellectual and spiritual life ("and the truth shall make you free"). It was not until the early part of this century, however, that a philosophy emerged which made the liberation of the human spirit its message and goal.

It was a characteristically Russian philosophy, with acknowledgments to Dostoevsky, though a variety of other sources were recognized as well.

The most brilliant representative of this school was Nicolas Berdyaev, who, in the quarter-century before his death in 1948, made a deep impression on the thought of the West. In *Slavery and Freedom* (1944) and in a number of earlier works Berdyaev laid down his doctrine and his program.

Lev Shestov, born in Russia in 1866 of Jewish parents, was a gifted exponent of these ideas. With a slight variation in terminology, he proclaims the same philosophy as Berdyaev. *Athens and Jerusalem* is a collection of four long essays published just a few years before Shestov's death in 1938. The theme that is sustained throughout, though variously elaborated, is the liberation of the human spirit from metaphysical enslavement.

This enslavement, Shestov insists, operates through the reign of Necessity—the necessity imposed by objective fact,

and the necessity imposed by logic. Objective fact tells us that Socrates died of a state-imposed punishment in 399 B.C.; and however outraged we may be by this "impossible" event, fact it remains, and nothing we can do can change it. We are beaten and frustrated by Necessity. "Not even the gods can fight necessity," Plato sadly recognized. And Aristotle, quoting Agathon, laid it down that "one thing only is impossible to God; to make undone that which has been done." God too stands under the harsh and implacable rule of Necessity.

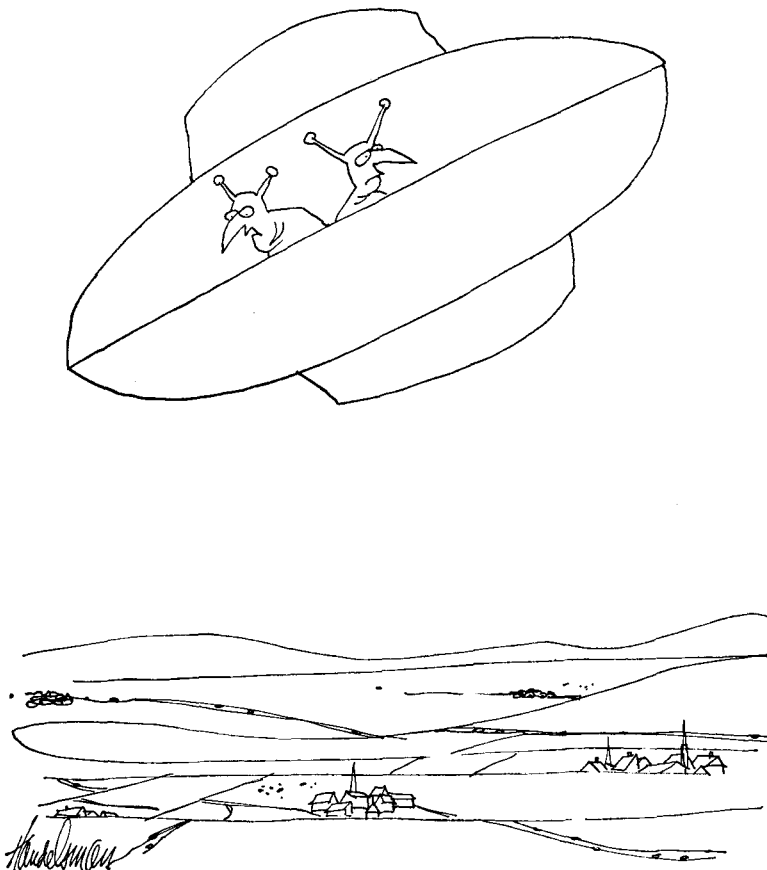
Even harsher and more implacable are the compulsions of logic: the "laws" of identity, contradiction, and the excluded middle. Who ever imposed these "laws" that are allegedly binding even on God? Shestov demands. By what right? And why should we acknowledge this alien and hateful rule?

BUT may not these detested fetters be precisely what we need to lend stability, security, and ontological ground to existence? Ah, rejoins Shestov, this craving for stability, security, grounding, is what leads man to enslave himself, renounce his primal freedom, and settle down under the spiritless rule of Necessity. And he goes on:

Groundlessness is the basic, most enviable, and to us most incomprehensible privilege of the Divine. Consequently, our whole moral struggle, even as our rational inquiry . . . will bring us sooner or later (rather later, much later, than sooner) to emancipation not only from moral evaluations but also from reason's eternal truths . . . It is granted to man to have prescience of ultimate freedom.

And this brings us to the second basic theme in Shestov: the liberating promise of faith. If reason, knowledge, logic are all agents of the tyrant Necessity, faith in the God of the Bible, for whom "all things are possible" and who has promised that for the truly faithful all things will be possible, is the power of liberation. In faith we may find the strength to "renounce knowledge, and seek the protection of the 'caprice' [of God]." "If you have faith. . . nothing shall be impossible to you" (Matt. 17:20). Reason, logic, science are the word of Athens; faith is the word of Jerusalem. The one is the word of enslavement, the other the word of freedom.

Of course the theme of *Athens and Jerusalem* is not new. Shestov himself refers frequently to Tertullian and Martin Luther, for example. He might also have referred to the medieval Jewish thinker and poet Judah Ha-Levi, who warned: "Be not seduced by the wisdom of the Greeks; it bears flowers but no fruit!" Yet, however familiar the theme, Shestov develops it in such profound



"Amazing! You'd swear there were villages, farms, and roads down there. Actually it's nothing but marsh gas."

and original ways that we soon come to overlook the irritating repetitiousness of his treatment. Yes, he acknowledges, "I irritate people, because I am always repeating the same thing. This was also the reason for the Athenians' dissatisfaction with Socrates." In the face of such candor, what can one say?

Indeed, what can one say about Shestov's entire philosophy, if philosophy it can be called? We have just about managed to swallow Søren Kierkegaard, with his Paradox and "objective uncertainty held fast by personal appropriation." Kierkegaard made no such frontal attack on reason and knowledge as does Shestov, and Shestov chides him for "hesitancy." Are we now to move over to Shestov's absolutely uncompromising position, burning all bridges behind us? There are several reasons, I think, why we should not be too precipitate.

**I**N the first place, Shestov's own position, despite all the repetition, is not very clear. Is he against philosophy as such, or does he want to lay down the "true" philosophy? It makes a good deal of difference. And then, how can we honor his revolutionary appeal to us to overthrow the tyrannical rule of reason, logic, and fact—quite in the spirit of Dostoevsky's "man from the Underground"—when he himself, in his very appeal, in this very book, relies so heavily on the cogencies of logical inference and coherent argumentation? In fact, reason emerges from Shestov's assault not altogether destroyed, because it is reason that is employed to destroy it.

And is Lev Shestov's conception of Biblical faith as opening up the vista of pure freedom true to the Bible? Hardly, despite Berdyaev and the mystics and theosophists to whom Berdyaev so often appeals. The Biblical faith has its own compulsions, coercions, and commandments, which are as rigorous as those imposed by the goddess Necessity. Shestov's "annulment" of history, moreover, is even more unbiblical.

There are many other objections that could be raised. And yet—for there is a "yet"—is it not shatteringly true that "all metaphysical systems begin with freedom and end with necessity" (slavery)? This is the shocking truth that gives real force to Shestov's radical crusade.

This is probably the best of Shestov's writings, and it is his only book as yet translated into English. The translation, by Professor Bernard Martin of Western Reserve University, is excellent, and so is his introductory essay on the life and thought of Lev Shestov. The Berdyaev school is now rather under a cloud—which is all the more reason why everyone interested in philosophy, theology, or the history of ideas should read this work of a truly gifted thinker.

**Healer and Seer:** Edgar Cayce, who practiced a special type of clairvoyance, has had several able and enthusiastic chroniclers, among them Thomas Sugrue, who wrote *There Is a River*, and Gina Cerminara, author of *Many Mansions* and other books centering on Cayce. The number of people willing to swear by his gifts is doubtless very large, and inquiry into his work—Cayce died in 1944—is further facilitated by the files of the Association for Research and Enlightenment at Virginia Beach, which has indexed more than 14,000 of his "psychic readings." Besides interviewing several people who assert they have benefited from Cayce's medical diagnoses and his suggested treatment, including the composer-conductor Alan Hovhaness, Jess Stearn scrutinized Cayce's retrocognitive and precognitive impressions on such subjects as geology (earthquakes, sunken continents, etc.), as well as his concepts concerning reincarnation, past and future civilizations, and the life patterns of new-born babies. Although in *Edgar Cayce: The Sleeping Prophet* (Doubleday, \$4.95) he maintains the stance of the detached, even hard-boiled reporter, Stearn gives Cayce the benefit of virtually every doubt. With dramatic human-interest material this works well enough; in other areas it tends to be all too selective.

When, for instance, a Cayce precognition suggests that Manhattan will sometime be submerged by an earthquake, Stearn tries to verify it by interviewing a retired Con Edison engineer, who tells him about "the Fourteenth Street fault" and adds "in the event of a major earthquake in this area, all Manhattan from Fourteenth Street south could very easily drop into the bay."

Anyone who has seen the full texts of Cayce readings must find them tough going, with convoluted sentences and elusive metaphors. Stearn has been almost too successful in picking out the concrete, leaving aside the verbiage that envelops it. Much in the manner of the priests who interpreted the all-but-impenetrable language of the Delphic Oracle, he selects, illuminates, juxtaposes, and amplifies prophetic and diagnostic Cayceisms for which he is able to find positive correlations.

The book makes one realize the immense comfort that a man of Edgar Cayce's obvious empathy and graciousness brought to those who approached him with their problems. As a diagnostician-healer he was in many ways unique; yet he was in the ancient mainstream of the sage-and-counselor who dispels doubts, reassures, suggests remedies, and points in specific directions. In our computer-ridden era the need for the sort of attention that Cayce gave is as strong as ever, but the medical profession and its adjuncts no longer adequately respond to it.

I think it does no injustice to the man to speak of a "Cayce legend," which Stearn's book tends to reinforce, and which the executors of his legacy would prefer to prevent from developing into a personal "cult." Nevertheless, the trance-like condition in which Cayce practiced his clairvoyance remains a mystery, in need of further research, as do the apparently related hypnotic and auto-hypnotic states. Stearn's enthusiastic reappraisal of Cayce's work should encourage additional inquiries that neither embellish nor scoff, but add to our objective knowledge of psycho-physiological frontiers. —MARTIN EBON.



"Aw, forget it, Bernie. It's either them or us."