



# Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev Shestov on Dostoevsky: the unfinalized dialogue

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## Abstract

Bakhtin's view of the history of the novel, through the lens of Dostoevsky's writing in his famous study on Dostoevsky's poetics (1963), has had a significant impact on the way we read Dostoevsky today. On the other hand, Shestov's original explorations of the human soul, which were drawn on his reading of Dostoevsky and made a lasting impression on his contemporaries, are still relatively unknown to the English-speaking reader. Having traced the history of the regenerations of Dostoevsky's convictions in his earlier works, in his mature writings Shestov proposed that at a time of deep crisis the human mind may acquire a new dimension, which lies beyond the limits of the comprehensible and the explicable. Building on his analysis of Dostoevsky's life and work, a transformative shift in Shestov's own worldview, led to significant alterations in his reading of Dostoevsky in the final years of his life.

In this essay, as I draw the two thinkers into a dialogue, I try to look beyond the obvious differences in the two philosophers' views (though I acknowledge them) and, with respect to both thinkers' outstanding contributions to twentieth-century European culture, I attempt to discover a number of key developing points in their views derived from their shared love of Dostoevsky's art. Contrasting Shestov's interpretation of Dostoevsky to that of Bakhtin's, I argue that despite their different methods, standpoints, and philosophical views, and despite the seemingly antagonizing nature of their observations, Bakhtin and Shestov arrived at a number of conclusions, which contributed to our present understanding of Dostoevsky's worldview.

**Keywords** Mikhail Bakhtin · Lev Shestov · Fyodor Dostoevsky · Polyphony · Dialogue of voices · Apophatic theology · I and Thou

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I dedicate this essay to the memory of my grandfather, Alexander Shulimovich Shaikevich.

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*We cannot penetrate behind the manifold to find living unity. But we can create living unity out of the manifold.*  
*Martin Buber (1957, p. 19)*

## Introduction. An apophatic unity: Bakhtin and Shestov

In the *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963) Mikhail Bakhtin has credited the soviet literary critic Valery Kirpotin<sup>1</sup> for emphasising 'Dostoevsky's special ability to see precisely the soul of *others*'. Bakhtin quoted from Kirpotin's book, *F. M. Dostoevsky* (1947):

Dostoevsky had the seeming capacity to *visualize directly someone else's psyche*. He looked into someone else's soul as if equipped with a magnifying glass that permitted him to detect the subtlest nuances, to follow the most inconspicuous modulations and transitions in the inner life of man. Dostoevsky, as if *passing over the external barriers*, observes directly the psychological processes taking place in a man, and fixes them on paper. . . (Kirpotin 1947, p. 63)

In the book, published in Moscow during the Stalin regime, Kirpotin proposed that Dostoevsky derived his insights into the human psyche based on a variety of sources: his introspective analysis, observations of other people, and his thorough studies of the works of Russian and world literature. Specifically, the critic emphasised that Dostoevsky 'drew his conclusions from both *inner* and *outer* experience' (Kirpotin 1947, p. 63).<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin acknowledged that Kirpotin's analysis of the writer's work had been of significant importance to him, especially with respect to 'a correct understanding of Dostoevsky's *polyphony*', though Kirpotin did not use the term. Furthermore, Bakhtin suggested that Kirpotin's conclusions were quite similar to his own (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 37).

A major representative of twentieth-century European culture, Bakhtin saw Dostoevsky's art as immune from the discipline of time so far as the writer's works contained no final, finalising discourse that defined anything once and for ever (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 251). As David Patterson pointed out, Bakhtin has a sense of something beyond, something otherwise, which underlies one's responsibility to the other and the significance of one's expression (Patterson 1987, p. 6). Since the 1963 revision of Bakhtin's study on Dostoevsky's poetics, the influence of Bakhtin's polyphonic conception of Dostoevsky's novels has been felt in English-speaking literary criticism. Following Bakhtin's popularity in Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s, the impact of Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky spread, and Shestov's interpretations of Dostoevsky have recently attracted renewed attention. Since Shestov's death eighty-five years ago, the thinker's complex paradoxical vision has received various, sometimes diametrically opposed readings, although his original explorations of the human soul drawn on his reading of Dostoevsky are still relatively unknown. Among those thinkers of the last century who considered Dostoevsky to have revolutionised

<sup>1</sup> Valery Yakovlevich Kirpotin (real name: Semen Izrailevich Rabinovich) (1898–1997).

<sup>2</sup> The English translations from V. Kirpotin's book on Dostoevsky (1947) are my own. Italics are mine.

modern European philosophy, psychology, and sociology, two are the topic of this essay: Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and Lev Shestov (1866–1938).

As an author of a paradoxical strand of religious philosophy (Fotiade 2020, p. 464), Shestov believes that thinking originates in a moment of vulnerability; the moment, in which the boundaries between human / divine, and self / other have melted. Employing the apophatic discourses of saying and unsaying, knowing and unknowing, seeing and unseeing, the Kyiv-born philosopher reversed the nineteenth-century idea of converting the invisible into that which could be seen. An attempt to shorten the distance between human and divine, Shestov's reading of Dostoevsky took shape in the form of a dialogue with God. Specifically, as I argue below, following a transformative movement of Shestov's worldview, his method of 'looking into another's soul'—as activated in his analysis of Dostoevsky—encapsulated a reciprocal dialogic relationship between the human 'I' and the divine 'Thou'.

While contemporary literary criticism gives prominence to Bakhtin's dialogical reading of Dostoevsky, it 'has not been subjected to thorough interpretation and we are yet to face its controversial multi-voicedness' (Tihanov 2000, p. 187). Dialogism implies an exchange of ideas between different people or different kinds of ideas. Respect of another person's opinion is the necessary condition for a successful dialogue, because genuine dialogues, in Buber's words, take place between 'one open-hearted person to another open-hearted person' (Buber 2002, p. 9). At the same time, genuine dialogue presupposes discovering something that is not yet known. My aim is not to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of the thoughts of the two thinkers. Rather, while acknowledging the existing and sometimes obvious differences between Bakhtin's and Shestov's interpretations, I aim to discover a number of key points where Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky could be seen as overlapping Shestov's, which would open new avenues for further investigation. Building on Kirpotin's observations, first, I propose that the apophatic tendencies that are present in Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky find common ground with that of Shestov's. My second proposition is that Shestov's dialogic *I* and *Thou* encounter, which he manifested in his evolving reading of Dostoevsky, could be comparable to the *I* to '*the other*' relation in Bakhtin's interpretation of the writer's work. The ultimate purpose of this research article is an attempt to involve Shestov's introspective explorations of Dostoevsky's inner world (i.e., his 'wanderings through the writer's soul') with Bakhtin's multi-voiced, carnivalized, outward-bound rendition of Dostoevsky.

## Bakhtin's monologic/polyphonic discourse and Shestov's philosophy of tragedy

One of Dostoevsky's most committed readers, Bakhtin attributed to Dostoevsky a completely new type of artistic conception, which is now often referred to as the polyphonic. In *Problemy Poetiki Dostoevskogo* [Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics] (1963) Bakhtin argued that Dostoevsky's characters do not represent the author's voice but rather the author in Dostoevsky is present *alongside* his characters (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 7). Bakhtin demonstrated that Dostoevsky's text is composed as a polyphonic concert of living voices, one of which could be that of the narrator. Bakhtin's

observations of Dostoevsky's poetics embodied his attempts to define the basic characteristics of Dostoevsky's art from the point of view of the main thesis in the book—the concept of polyphony, or *mnogogolosie* [multivoicedness].

For Bakhtin, 'The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice' (Bakhtin 1981, p. 261). Bakhtin defined Dostoevsky's novel as an artistically organised social medley of speech [*raznorechie*] and at times a medley of languages [*raznoyazychie*], and an individual discord of voices [*raznogolositsa*] (Bakhtin 2019a). The dialogic multi-layered orientation of one person to another person's discourse is at the core of Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's novels. In the monologic novel, on the contrary, all voices are gathered together in a single consciousness, and 'the author's intentions and evaluations must dominate over all the others and must form a compact and unambiguous whole' (Bakhtin 2019a, pp. 203–204). In Bakhtin's view, the tendency to monologise Dostoevsky's novel encompasses one's striving to give finalising definitions to the heroes in his novels, and this outlook ignores the dialogic openness of Dostoevsky's artistic world (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 272). Bakhtin's interpretation therefore cautioned against attributing the 'word' of the writer's characters to Dostoevsky (Gibson 1973, p. 66). In the philosopher's other works, however, such as 'Discourse [*Slovo*] in the Novel (1934–1935), Bakhtin discusses 'monologic utterance' as one of the concepts that embodied specific sociohistorical destinies of European languages (Bakhtin 1981, p. 270). He asserts that 'internal dialogization becomes one of the most fundamental aspects of prose style and undergoes a specific artistic elaboration' (Bakhtin 1981, p. 284). The internal dialogism of the word, according to Bakhtin, may occur in a monologic utterance as well (Bakhtin 1981, p. 279).

By contrast, in Shestov's philosophical view, every philosophical statement inevitably bears the character and personal ways of thinking of its author, and it is not the writers' logic, but their sincerity that plays a fundamental part in the art of philosophy (Shestov 1908, p. 191, Shestov 1968b, p. 262). Described by Shestov as his 'veritable master' (Fondane 1982), the creative genius of Dostoevsky's imagination had a decisive impact on his philosophical worldview. In his treatment of Dostoevsky's works, Shestov was first of all interested in the personal experience of the author, the creator of the text. In Dostoevsky, Shestov appreciated a writer whose fictional characters spoke of himself: *his* spiritual path, *his* faith, and *his* struggles (Ogden 2021a, 2022, p. 78). As Andrius Valevicius wrote, Shestov "'crawls into the skin" of the other and the two begin to debate' (Valevicius 1993, p. 5).

In *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903), Shestov uncovered 'the possibility of an alternative, underground strain of philosophical inquiry, the "philosophy of tragedy"' (Fotiade 2020, p. 468). He observed that from the earlier years in his writing Dostoevsky depicted scenes that are sombre and painful, telling stories of the lives of the humiliated and insulted (Shestov 1969a, pp. 148–149). At the start of his literary career, Dostoevsky was captivated by the idea of 'humanity', which he borrowed from his teacher Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848) (Shestov 1969a, p. 152). According to Shestov's reading, Dostoevsky's writing from his pre-exile period 'fervently extolled realism', and in his works of this period, such as *Poor Folk* [*Bednye Liudi*] (1845), *The Double* [*Dvoinik*] (1846), *White Nights* [*Belye Nochi*] (1848), and *Netochka Nezvanova* (1849) 'he arranges for the triumph of the good

over evil' (Shestov 1969a, p. 159). But, in Shestov's view, the writer was on the eve of a 'great spiritual upheaval', when his 'underground' period would begin (Shestov 1969a, p. 167). *Notes from the Underground* [*Zapiski iz Podpolia*] (1864) is Dostoevsky's most important work, claimed Shestov, since starting from this novel the writer fundamentally reconsidered his former ideals and took on a challenge to incorporate his own life experience into his philosophical vision.<sup>3</sup> To trace the changes that took place in Dostoevsky's worldview, Shestov focused on a significant event in the writer's biography: Dostoevsky's close encounter with death in 1849 when the writer got involved with the Petrashevsky Circle, was arrested, convicted and later on subjected to 'mock execution'. In the book, Shestov proposed that in his post-exile writing Dostoevsky undertook a fundamental 'regeneration of his convictions' [*pererozhdenie svoikh ubezhdenii*] (Shestov 1969a, p. 157, p. 143) and subsequently renounced the ideals of 'humanity', which inspired his earlier works.<sup>4</sup> However, as I have argued elsewhere, Shestov's reading of Dostoevsky had been progressive, as he returned to and reworked the theme of Dostoevsky's 'regeneration of convictions' a number of times (Ogden 2021b). Significantly, in the year before his death, Shestov's interpretation of Dostoevsky's life and work underwent considerable alterations.

At first glance, it may seem that Shestov's reading of Dostoevsky is in many ways antagonistic to Bakhtin's dialogical interpretation of Dostoevsky's novels. In his book, Bakhtin named Shestov amongst Dostoevsky's commentators (along with Rozanov, Merezhkovsky, and others) who had taken 'the path of philosophical monologization' in 'their attempt to squeeze the artist's demonstrated plurality of consciousness into the systemically monologic framework of a single worldview' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 9). According to Bakhtin, a *true* reader of Dostoevsky is the one who perceives his novels not in the monologic mode (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 68).

In Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky, the relation of 'author and hero' is the relation of each of us to each other. For, in his account, in Dostoevsky, 'the author's word stands opposite the fully valid and pure unalloyed word of the hero' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 56). Thus, according to Bakhtin, in the dialogical meeting between author and hero, the self encounters itself through its response to the other. Precisely, within the dialogical relation, both author and hero are unfinalised (Patterson 1988, p. 70, p. 86). In one of his later works, reflecting on the conflicting tendencies between 'self' and 'other', Bakhtin wrote: 'After all, our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, and artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with other's

<sup>3</sup>Shestov's highly subjective reading of Dostoevsky's work and his particular way of identifying 'the voice' of the author with that of the Underground Man received mixed reaction amongst literary critics. While Aaron Steinberg, Georgy Adamovich and John M. Murry welcomed Shestov's maverick methodology, Nikolai Berdyaev accused his friend of 'Shestovising' other authors (that is, transferring his own situation onto other people who well may be in a completely different situation). As documented by Benjamin Fondane, in their conversation on 4 October 1935, Shestov said: 'He [Berdyaev] accuses me all the time of making all the writers I talk about into my own image: he says that neither Dostoevsky, nor Tolstoy, nor Kierkegaard ever said what I made them say'. See: Fondane (1982). Many scholars in subsequent generations, including Joseph Frank and Boris Groys, did not support Shestov's method of associating the words of a character with those of the author. See: Frank (2020, p. 74, p. 99), Groys (2012, p. 39). One of the criticisms that has been made against Shestov's approach to Dostoevsky's works was an assertion that in his interpretations the author is more present than the subject of his analysis.

<sup>4</sup>In 1873 Dostoevsky wrote in his *Diary of a Writer*: 'It would be very difficult for me to tell the story of the regeneration of my convictions'. See: Dostoevsky (1894–95, p. 342).

thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well' (Bakhtin 1994, p. 86).<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin observed that 'As an artist, Dostoevsky did not create his ideas in the same way philosophers or scholars create theirs—he created images of ideas found, heard, sometimes divined by him in reality itself, that is, ideas already living or entering life as idea-forces' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 90). The idea in Dostoevsky is never cut off from the voice (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 279). By contrast, in the monologic world, Bakhtin contended, an idea is merely placed in the mouth of the hero, but it could with equal success be placed in the mouth of any other hero. For the author of a monologic novel, it is important only that a given idea be uttered somewhere in the context of a given work (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 79).

According to Bakhtin, in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel, by nature dialogic, the idea becomes a *live event* and participates in communion *between* consciousnesses (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 88). In his view, Dostoevsky polyphonically elaborated ideas foreign to him as if they were his own (Gibson 1973, p. 65). According to Bakhtin's analysis, 'Dostoevsky was capable of representing someone else's idea, preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea, while at the same time also preserving a distance, neither confirming the idea nor merging it with his own expressed ideology' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 85). Consequently, in Bakhtin's view, genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible in the case of philosophical monologism. He insisted that 'The polyphonic project is incompatible with a mono-ideational framework of the ordinary sort' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 78).

Contrary to Bakhtin's interpretation of how the monologic writers perceive Dostoevsky, Shestov did not view Dostoevsky as a subjective romantic trapped in the world of his own consciousness (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 61). 'In subjectivity', as Buber noted, 'the spiritual substance of the person matters. [...] No human being is pure person, and none is pure ego; none is entirely actual, none entirely lacking in actuality. Each lives in a twofold I' (Buber 1970, pp. 113–114).<sup>6</sup> In the same way, in Shestov's view, the tragic aspect of human life is not something held against us, but on the contrary, is a source of meaning and of value (Finkenthal 2010, p. 26). According to his analysis, following the mock execution and subsequent 'regeneration of convictions', Dostoevsky renounced all certainty in his life and opposed to it—as his supreme goal—uncertainty (Shestov 1968b, p. 103). In this newly established practice of rebellion, Dostoevsky's teachers were convicts. As suggested by Shestov, after Dostoevsky's experience at the Siberian camp, the writer no longer perceived man's nature as ethical. The idea that man is a rational, prudent creature was now a pure fiction to him, 'for human nature acts *as a whole*—unconsciously as well as consciously' (Zenkovsky 1962, p. 135). Here came Dostoevsky's 'recognition that the key to the understanding of man lies deeper than consciousness, conscience, or reason—in the "underground" of the unconscious, where he "himself" exists' and where freedom is his most precious possession (Zenkovsky 1962, p. 135). Conversely to the trajectory of Bakhtin's investigation, which was directed outward, to the *other*,

<sup>5</sup>Regarding the problem of the self in Dostoevsky, see: Corrigan (2017).

<sup>6</sup>Shestov and Buber met in 1928 and subsequently corresponded. Shestov valued his colleague's religious thought very highly and considered Buber 'one of the rare thinkers to whom that most intense seriousness of spiritual searching about which Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have told us belongs'. See: Shestov (1982, p. 105).

Shestov insisted on the need for subjectivity and inwardness in the individual's search for truth. For him, the soul of the other remained invisible: 'we only guess at it, perhaps rightly, perhaps mistakenly' (Shestov 1916, p. 144). As he wrote,

Try to bend, mentally, over another's soul: you will see nothing but a vast, empty, black abyss, and you will only be seized with giddiness for your pains. Thus, properly speaking, the expression 'to look into another's soul' is only an abortive metaphor. All that we can do is to argue from the outward data to the inward feelings. [...] Perhaps in the depth of the dark abyss of which we spoke, something might be found, were it not for the giddiness. Therefore it is not so necessary to invent new methods as to learn to look fearlessly into the depths, which always appear unfathomable to the unaccustomed eye. (Shestov 1916, p. 143, p. 145)

Starting from his early works, Shestov developed his original method of investigation of the minds of world's philosophers and writers, the method he called 'wandering through human souls'. Throughout his lifelong philosophical career Shestov tirelessly wandered through the souls of his heroes, thinkers like Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Plato, Luther, Spinoza, Pascal, Kierkegaard and others. Focusing on biographical details in the writer's life, Shestov's philosophical analysis aimed to distinguish the *inner* voice of the writer through the voices of his characters in order to decipher the undercurrents of the author's consciousness, and reveal his internal struggle in its evolutionary progression. In Dostoevsky, in particular, Shestov appreciated a pioneer and inspirer of a radically renewed understanding of human nature, an artist who shared with his readers all that went on in his soul.

In the book on Dostoevsky I mentioned earlier, Kirpotin seems to have evoked Shestov's view, when he stated that 'The dispute which took place in his soul, Dostoevsky transported on the pages of his novels' (Kirpotin 1947, p. 29). However, in his 'wanderings' through the souls of the world's writers and thinkers, Shestov was seeking to 'be granted a glimpse of the mysterious "thou"' (Shestov 1916, p. 146). In his effort to penetrate the writer's psyche—as it is conveyed in his reading of Dostoevsky—Shestov was at the same time dealing with his own inner battles.<sup>7</sup> Thus, according to Fanya Lovtzky, 'in analysing his literary patients, Lev was using them as masks', because 'what he was really occupied with was himself, with his auto-analysis' (Lovtzky, quoted in Steinberg 1991, p. 244).<sup>8</sup> Henceforth, it is possible to suggest that Shestov's analysis of Dostoevsky's study of the unconscious mind incorporated his own quest for the authentic self.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Shestov's psychoanalytic attempt to trace the twists and turns of the writer's spiritual path could have been

<sup>7</sup>While Kirpotin and Bakhtin often used the words 'psyche' and 'soul' as interchangeable terms, Shestov drew a line between the two terms. In his writings, Shestov primarily spoke of the human soul. See: Shestov (1916, p. 144).

<sup>8</sup>According to Dr Fanya Lovtzky, Shestov's sister and a psychoanalyst, in his writing, her brother anticipated psychoanalysis. Thus, describing Shestov's particular method of interpretation, Lovtzky wrote that 'In his work on himself, he [Shestov] anticipates psychoanalysis'. See: Steinberg (1991, p. 244).

<sup>9</sup>As a child, Shestov was introduced to classical Hebrew literature by his father, Isaac Schwarzmann. See: Fotiade (2020, p. 464). In the tradition of Jewish mysticism, 'All that lives is an expression of God's language', and 'self-knowledge is the surest way to God who reveals Himself in the depths of the self' See: Scholem (1941, p. 18).



provoked by his empathetic association with Dostoevsky's inner struggles.<sup>10</sup> In the dynamic development of Shestov's analysis, the continuous altering and modifying of the theme of the 'regenerations of Dostoevsky's convictions' manifested itself in the dialogic *I* and *Thou* communication, in which *Thou* is 'the holy other'. Comparably, for Bakhtin, human psyche is a dynamic entity designed to learn things from the outside, not inside. In his account, psyche is 'a "social entity", a space to be filled with ideological signs' (Emerson in Bakhtin 1986a, p. 25). Correspondingly, the soul for Bakhtin cannot be hidden within one's self/-consciousness. For, according to him, 'The soul as an empirical reality, that is, neutral toward [the forms generated by intersubjective aesthetic activity] represents an abstract construction produced by the thought of psychology' (Bakhtin 1990, p. 103). When seen through a Bakhtinian lens therefore, in Dostoevsky's work his study of the personality is collapsed and dispersed into others (Corrigan 2017, p. 84). To put it another way, Dostoevsky 'stakes his fondest hopes on one set of characters, goes violently into reverse to identify with another and maintains his own equilibrium, all at once' (Gibson 1973, p. 69).

In his philosophical worldview, which was expressed in his reading of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin drew heavily on Kant. What is important for Bakhtin is that 'Kant's transcendental idealism claims that the very possibility of nature depends on the transcendental capacity for objectivity, for differentiation between self and other' (Poole 2001, p. 154). As Randall A. Poole pointed out, 'Bakhtin is interested in the subject and object not as abstract epistemological categories, but as embodied, concrete human beings, each occupying its own unique place in the world' (Poole 2001, p. 153). In his distinction of self and other—rooted in the nature of moral experience—which is neither derivative nor reducible to the empirical world, Bakhtin sided with Kant.

Kant's name was often mentioned amongst many thinkers discussed in Shestov's writings. The philosopher repeatedly challenged Kant's 'disinterested' philosophical approach and the argument for universal truth, an *a priori*: 'It is surely evident that truth lies beyond synthetic judgements *a priori*, and that it cannot at all resemble an *a priori* judgement, and in fact cannot be like a judgement of any kind' (Shestov 1916, p. 189). From Shestov's point of view, Dostoevsky opposed his new vision of reality to the ideas of Kant and German philosophical idealism, which were purporting to bring a solution for suffering mankind (Shestov 1982, p. 155).<sup>11</sup> For, in his account, Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* 'offered a more radical critique of the theory of knowledge than Kant with his *Critique of Pure Reason*' (Shestov 1968a, p. 400). Shestov nevertheless credited Kant's moral doctrine and his theory of *a priori* judgments for creating the conditions for the emergence of the other kind of thinking: 'when the unshakeable foundations of positivism will be shaken' and 'all the disturbing questions of life must in some way or other be transferred to the realm of the unknowable' (Shestov 1920, pp. 217–218; 1969a, p. 188, p. 275). Decisively, Shestov saw an unresolvable irreconcilability between speculative philosophy, represented by the tradition extending from Socrates and Hegel, which seeks to arrive at rationally

<sup>10</sup>For further detail regarding the relation between Shestov's philosophy and Freud's psychoanalytic investigations of the unconscious mind, see: Ogden (2021b, pp. 159–180), Ogden (2023).

<sup>11</sup>Shestov observed that Dostoevsky had probably never read Hegel, although during the time that he was part of Belinsky's circle, the writer became familiar enough with the basic statements of Hegel's philosophy. See: Shestov (1969b).



demonstrable, necessary truths, and his worldview, which originates in the truth of Revelation in the Bible, the Torah and the Talmud.<sup>12</sup>

Seeking to attain a life-affirming meaning in the tragic finality of human existence, Shestov attempted to move away from theoretical arguments when he opposed the creative freedom of the individual human [*chelovek*] to the representative power of dogmatisms (philosophic, scientific and moral) (Ogden 2016, p. 3). He began to explore the irrational or metaphysical forces of the mind that seemed to be at work beyond physical reality. He wrote: ‘Long ago Dostoevsky pointed out that the instinct of distraction is as natural to the human soul as that of creation’ (Shestov 1916, p. 138). While logic can be useful in some matters, ‘after Kant, his disciples and successors might have answered quietly that the devil alone knows the use of consistency’ and ‘truth lives by contradictions’ (Shestov 1916, p. 140). In Shestov’s account, many philosophic doctrines, which begin from the premise of seeking to establish one universal truth in their multiple developments, exemplify the existing plurality of truths. According to him, the history of philosophy thereby shows us that there cannot be ‘one sovereign truth’:

It is usually believed that one should study the history of philosophy in order to be palpably convinced that mankind has gradually mastered its delusions and is now on the high road to ultimate truth. My opinion is that the history of philosophy must bring every impartial person, who is not infected with modern prejudices, to a directly opposite conclusion. There can be no doubt that a whole series of questions exists, like that of the value of life, which by their very essence do not admit of a uniform solution. (Shestov 1916, p. 196)

Coming from his inward bound perspective, corresponding to his method of the ‘wandering through the human souls’, Shestov insisted on the multiplicity of truths. But it is not easy to follow the philosopher’s ‘self-contradictory’ logic, as his thinking attempted to break away from any sort of traditional metaphysical framework:

Perhaps the limits between ‘this world’ and ‘the other world’ are also essentially of an experimental origin, neither rooted in the nature of our things, as was thought before Kant, or in the nature of our reason, as was thought after Kant. Perhaps indeed a partition does exist, and makes vain all attempts to cross over. But perhaps there comes a moment when the partition is removed. (Shestov 1920, pp. 142–143)

Thus, Shestov seems to both agree and disagree with Kirpotin who noted that in Dostoevsky’s gift to see someone else’s psyche, someone else’s ‘soul’ there was nothing *a priori* (Kirpotin 1947, p. 63). While acknowledging contrasting tendencies in Dostoevsky’s characters, Kirpotin nevertheless maintained that ‘His [Dostoevsky’s] world—is a world of many objectively existing psychologies, interacting with each other, which excludes subjectivity and solipsism of psychological processes’ (Kirpotin 1947, p. 67).

<sup>12</sup>Regarding the influence of the Rabbinic literature and other texts of Jewish mystics on Shestov’s thought see: Ogden (2021b, p. 29, pp. 32–36, p. 124 fn40, p. 219, pp. 222–224). Regarding Shestov’s interpretation of the biblical revelation and the biblical story of Adam’s Fall see: Ogden (2021b, pp. 190–191, pp. 154–156). For a comprehensive overview of Shestov’s views on Christianity and Judaism, see: Finkenthal (2010).

Comparably, for Bakhtin, polyphony—with its emphasis on a relational whole over isolated parts—is the event of interaction between autonomous and internally unfinalised consciousnesses (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 176). Commenting on the artistic depth and subtlety of Dostoevsky's artistic devices, Bakhtin emphasised that the “‘truth’ at which the hero must and indeed ultimately does arrive through clarifying the events to himself”, constitute for the writer the ‘truth of the hero's own consciousness’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 55). Consequently, as something to be fulfilled, truth lies in the dialogical quest for truth, a quest which characterizes discourse in the novel (Patterson 1993, p. 58).

Although in their approaches Bakhtin and Shestov looked at Dostoevsky's work from different angles, both thinkers highlighted open, unfinalised characteristics of the writer's artistic ideas. In order to see into the roots of Bakhtin's and Shestov's positions, we must turn our attention to Nietzsche. The catalyst for an early twentieth-century religious renewal movement called God-seeking (*Bogoiskatel'stvo*), Nietzsche's ideas were appreciated by both Bakhtin and Shestov.<sup>13</sup> As James M. Curtis pointed out, Bakhtin frequently refers to Nietzsche in his writings, alluding to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Gay Science* (Curtis 1986, pp. 333–339). As Curtis suggested, Bakhtin's distinction between the polyphonic novel and the monological novel could be derived from the following passage in *The Gay Science*:

I do not know of any more profound difference in the whole orientation of an artist than this, whether he looks at his work in progress (at ‘himself’) from the point of view of the witness, or whether he ‘has forgotten the world’, which is the essential feature of all monological art; it is based on forgetting; it is the music of forgetting. (Nietzsche 2019, p. 89)

According to Curtis, Bakhtin believed that Nietzsche was arguing for pluralism, and that his pluralistic ontology, not Nietzsche's provocative attacks on Christianity, constituted the essence of his thought (Curtis 1986, p. 335). ‘For Bakhtin, the irreducible pluralism of the self-other encounter in dialogue offers a model for Dostoevsky's works as whole’ (Curtis 1986, p. 337). Bakhtin's pluralism and his interest in Nietzsche fostered his notion of dialogue as it unfolds in his reading of Dostoevsky's novels. While emphasising that the characters' word in Dostoevsky's novel is as significant as the author's, Bakhtin draws the conclusion that in the creation of the diverse world of characters the writer's ‘extraordinary artistic capacity for seeing everything in coexistence’ is his ‘greatest strength’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 30). Precisely, from Bakhtin's perspective, it was Dostoevsky's ability to hear and understand ‘all voices immediately and simultaneously’ that permitted him to compose the polyphonic novel (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 30). Hereby, the philosopher's frequently cited words ‘I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations among them’ (Bakhtin 1986b, p. 169) come to mind. For in the dialogical relation, the voice of the other is never finalised; it constantly questions and continually reshapes its form and ideas.

Shestov was also deeply influenced by Nietzsche (Ogden 2016, pp. 94–110). Following the publication of Dmitry Merezhkovsky's *Lev Tolstoy and Dostoevsky*

<sup>13</sup> Among the God-Seekers were such writers as D. Merezhkovsky, Z. Gippius, N. Minsky, V. Rozanov and V. Soloviev (in his younger years).

(1901), to which Shestov reacted negatively, the philosopher's book, *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903) came out in St Petersburg.<sup>14</sup> In the comparative study of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Shestov expressed his admiration for what he saw as Nietzsche's passionate and honest search for truth beyond conventional notions of good and evil and the German philosopher's refusal to submit to traditional verities (Ogden 2021b, pp. 59–65).<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche's aphoristic style and his original way of philosophising by way of a personal confession resonated with Shestov's own philosophical aspirations, that is, with his attempts to find meaning in the absurd finitude of human life and his efforts to uncover the possibility of attaining individual freedom.<sup>16</sup>

Both Bakhtin and Shestov understood the idea of human freedom to be one of the key themes in Dostoevsky's writing. For Bakhtin, on the one hand, freedom arises from the capacity of the single voice to participate in the polyphony of dialogised and unfinalised voices, and dialogic interrelationships. In his epiphany of voices, the word is revealed outward, in its relationship with the consciousness of others. For the existential thinker Shestov, on the other hand, human freedom is entangled with an opportunity for the mind to go through inner change—to be profoundly transformed, acquiring a divine dimension. For him, freedom is found within one's own mind and soul and is a divine creation of new, unlimited and infinite possibilities and it cannot be known; it is unknowable.

## The multiplicity of voices. Philosophy of language and philosophy as art

A scholar trained in the Germanic tradition of *Wissenschaft*, Bakhtin's worldview was formed intellectually by Kant and Schelling as well as by his reading of other German thinkers, especially Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) (Emerson 2020, p. 608). In his conversation with the soviet scholar Victor Duvakin on 22 February 1973, Bakhtin declared: 'I'm a philosopher, a thinker' (Bakhtin 2019b, p. 41). As a philosopher, Bakhtin selected the language of literature as the perspective of his philosophical reflections (Petrilli 2016, p. 326). For Bakhtin, language is not an abstract or general concept; it is manifested through an act of one person talking to another person, and sometimes that other person is one's own inner voice. Dialogic interaction takes place in the authentic sphere where language *lives* (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 183). Language is attributed to a voice, consciousness and self-consciousness, which altogether form a character. As Bakhtin noted, dialogic relationships must clothe themselves in discourse, that is, an utterance, and receive an *author*, that is, a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 184). For him, in this process

<sup>14</sup>In his reviews of Merezhkovsky's book, Shestov criticized the author for 'the complete distortion of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky'. See: Oppo (2020, pp. 78–81). Shestov's essay on Dostoevsky and Nietzsche was first published in *Mir Iskusstva* [World of Art] journal, edited by Sergei Diaghilev.

<sup>15</sup>In *Sola fide—Tol'ko veroyu*, Shestov compared the radical movement of Luther's faith with Nietzsche's leap 'beyond good and evil'. See: Shestov (1966, p. 261).

<sup>16</sup>In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche wrote: '[...] little by little I came to understand what every great philosophy to date has been: the personal confession of its author, a kind of unintended and unwitting memoir'. See: Nietzsche (2008, p. 8).

of ‘communion’, that is, in the interaction of one person with another, can the ‘man in man’ be revealed. The opposition of one person to another person is, according to Bakhtin, the opposition of ‘I’ to ‘the other’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 252).

Echoing Kirpotin’s words quoted in the beginning of this paper, Bakhtin asserted that for Dostoevsky, the interrelationship of characters and their discourses is typical to the highest degree (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 256). In his account, in the personalities of major Dostoevsky heroes, such as Raskolnikov, Sonya, Myshkin, Stavrogin, Ivan and Dmitry Karamazov, ‘the profound consciousness of their own unfinalisability and indeterminacy is realised in very complex ways’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 59). For example, the real-life voices of Myshkin and Rogozin are interwoven and intersect with the voices in Nastasya Filippovna’s internal dialogue (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 258). The other tool Dostoevsky used, according to Bakhtin’s analysis, is the ‘great dialogue’ of the novel as a whole, in which an inner dialogic orientation becomes an integral part of the author’s design of the novel (Bakhtin 2019a, pp. 63–64). Thus, according to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s novels superficially conceal ‘the most subtle artistic calculations’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 64).

Despite his generous use of literary terms and his passion for the novel, literature was important to Bakhtin mainly as an illustration of his philosophy (Emerson 2020, p. 610). While Bakhtin’s concern was always with the humanities, the philosopher’s temperament, as Caryl Emerson observed, was not ‘the sort that dwells for long in existential darkness’ (Emerson 1994, p. 211). In Bakhtin’s worldview, man is not an isolated individual but acts authentically as a social and ethical being. For him, however, it is not the psychological or ethical characteristic of Dostoevsky’s work which matter, but ‘the striving of Dostoevsky’s artistic energies and the new form of his artistic visualization of the inner man’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 62). In Bakhtin’s view of Dostoevsky’s world, which is ‘profoundly pluralistic’, ‘narrative is argument and argument is narrative’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 26; Williams 2008, p. 113).

By defining his objects of investigation philosophically, Bakhtin nevertheless chose to describe culture as an activity with political and moral ends and objectives (Hirschkop and Shepherd 1989, p. 5).<sup>17</sup> Whether preoccupied with the philosophy of culture, or with the nexus of moral philosophy and aesthetics, Bakhtin as a thinker did not confine himself to any particular discipline (Tihanov 2018, p. 5). He wrote that all the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language and the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible (Bakhtin 1986a, p. 91). One of the key developments that the creation of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel initiated was that it changed the form of ideas in literary contexts, which enabled them to be transformed into images of ideas. The ‘liberation’ of the idea from its ‘monologic isolation and finalization’ allowed it to be thoroughly dialogised (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 92).

Contradiction and multiplicity are reoccurring themes for Bakhtin in his essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in which the verbs of struggle and conflict are dominant.

<sup>17</sup>Bakhtin and his collaborators, including M. I. Kagan, V. N. Voloshinov and P. N. Medvedev, formed a group of people whose work revolved around his own. The Bakhtin circle took shape first in Nevel in 1918, then in Vitebsk, and finally in Leningrad in 1924. Three foundational works published by the members of the Bakhtin circle include: *Freidizm. Kriticheskii ocherk* (1927) [Freudism: A critical sketch] and *Marksizm, filosofia jazyka* (1929) [Marxism and philosophy of language] by Valentin Voloshinov, and *Formal’nyi metod v literaturavedenii* (1928) [The formal method in the science of literature] by Pavel Medvedev.

Bakhtin stressed that ‘we must deal with the life and behaviour of discourse in a contradictory and multi-langued world’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 275). Perhaps even more decisively than Bakhtin, Shestov put the issue of contradiction at the centre of his discussions. In his view, human life is intrinsically contradictory, and thus its truth lives by contradictions (Shestov 1920, pp. 37–38). According to Shestov, ‘Philosophy without contradicting judgments would be either doomed to eternal silence, or would be churned into a mud of commonplace and reduced to nothing’ (Shestov 1916, p. 168). Contradiction and conflict are at the heart of his philosophy of tragedy and have become the crucial point of his aesthetic of tragedy (Oppo 2020, p. 89). Thus, with reference to Dostoevsky, Shestov wrote:

the greater the insult depicted, the more hopeless the grief described, the more dismal the past, the more hopeless the future—the greater the honour for the writer. After all, the highest praise an artist can be given is in the words: he captured and conveyed a genuinely tragic moment. (Shestov 1969a, p. 159)

Both Shestov and Bakhtin appreciated in Dostoevsky first of all an artist. Bakhtin valued in Dostoevsky an artist who ‘destroyed the self-enclosed monologic form of idea-prototypes and incorporated them into the great dialogue of his novels’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 91). Thus, according to Bakhtin, the confession of the Underground Man exemplifies the case of ‘extreme and acute dialogization: there is literally not a single monologically firm, undissociated word’ in it (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 227). He wrote: ‘Before us is an example of a vicious circle of dialogue which can neither be finished nor finalized’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 230). In *Notes from the Underground* the Underground Man’s dialogue that he conducts with himself is not only the polemic with the other on the subject of himself, but is also his polemic with the other on the subject of the world and society. The underground hero, therefore, is an ideologist (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 236). In a similar manner, Myshkin’s inner speech also develops dialogically, in relation to his own self as well as to the other (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 241). Furthermore, Ivan’s ideological discourse, according to Bakhtin, is characterised by its dialogic addressivity toward its referential object, and it is an example of extraordinary clarity and vividness (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 248).

On the one hand, for Bakhtin, the artistic quality of Dostoevsky’s worldview encapsulated the image of many unmerged personalities joined together in the unity of some spiritual event (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 13). In Dostoevsky’s artistic thinking, according to him, the truth about man is told through the mouths of others; ‘through a *dialogic* penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 59). On the other hand, according to Shestov, Dostoevsky opposed revealed truth to speculative truth, in which he saw the “absurdity of absurdities” (Shestov 1969b, p. 26, p. 24). For, in his view, a purely human courage is needed to renounce the finite for the eternal (Shestov 1969b, p. 19).

Possibly the most consistent of all existential thinkers (Pattison 1999, p. 191), Shestov described his philosophy as an art which originates in an ‘enormous absurdity’ and the ‘ugly reality’ of human existence. The perplexing nature of Dostoevsky’s writing that had captured Shestov’s interest in his younger years continued to stimulate the development of his philosophical vision in his mature years. His article ‘The Conquest of the Self-Evident’ [*Preodolenie Samoochevidnostei*] (1921),

published in Paris on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Dostoevsky's birth comprised a parable about Dostoevsky's receiving 'the mysterious gift' of 'a new pair of eyes' from the Angel of Death (Ogden 2021a,b, p. 2).<sup>18</sup> Drawing on the writer's life experience, once again Shestov's attention was drawn to the traumatic episode of Dostoevsky's mock execution. According to Shestov's telling, the Angel of Death, the Angel with a Thousand Eyes, sometimes visits a man, not to take him, but to leave him a new set of eyes. The revelation brings the dying person back to life. The encounter with the Angel of Death is a kind of uncanny experience, something unthinkable, yet deeply familiar, an interaction between one's past, one's present and one's anticipation of the future. Upon receiving the precious gift of the 'second vision' from the wings of the Angel of Death, Dostoevsky saw extraordinary things revealed to him (Shestov 1968b, p. 129).

As Shestov sees it, the acknowledgement of life's absurdity for Dostoevsky became an opportunity for a fearless venture into an unknown redemption that discovered an unseen and mysterious meaning. Following this life-threatening experience, Dostoevsky's vision was able to break through the destruction and chaos of absurd reality, and, in the face of the inevitability of death, reaffirm his life. Drawing on his reading of Dostoevsky, Shestov suggested that the moment of the total collapse of one's former worldview opens an opportunity to be 'awoken to life'—to a fundamental rebirth of one's convictions and beliefs.

As I have already mentioned, over the course of his life, there was a considerable shift in Shestov's reading of Dostoevsky with the focus on the notion of the 'regeneration of one's convictions' (or, 'awakening'). A year before his death, Shestov returned to the theme of Dostoevsky's life that captured his imagination in the beginning of his philosophical career. In the 1937 series of lectures *On the 'Regeneration of Convictions' in Dostoevsky*, by contrast to his earlier statements (in the book on Dostoevsky and Nietzsche), Shestov argued that Dostoevsky carried the convictions of his youth unchanged to the end of his life and suggested that throughout all his life Dostoevsky remained faithful to the ideas of 'humanity', which animated his first works (Shestov 1982, p. 149). Despite all the traumatic experiences of Dostoevsky's life, the writer, according to Shestov, had never given up his commitment to the ideal hero of his youth, 'the humblest man'. On the contrary, Shestov argued, it was Dostoevsky's morality and his belief in 'humanity' that gave the fullest scope to the underground idea. The writer, who, according to Shestov's analysis, imagined himself 'the benefactor of mankind', undertook an extraordinary task—to 'deceive' his readers with his stories of miracles and mysteries. For, in Shestov's view, if a man wishes to help people, he has to become a deceiver (Shestov 1982, p. 90).

As the years went by, Dostoevsky's talent matured and developed, which enabled him to speak more boldly (Shestov 1982, p. 146). Thus, according to Shestov, to find his truth Dostoevsky had to lead the reader through the depths of terror portrayed in his works. That way, according to Shestov, out of the deepest falls, Dostoevsky's characters learned to appeal to God (Shestov 1982, p. 170). 'It is clear', writes Shestov, 'that the regeneration of Dostoevsky's convictions must be sought not in the harden-

<sup>18</sup> Shestov left Kyiv in 1920 in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and lived in France for the rest of his life. He died in Paris in 1938.



ing of his heart but somewhere else altogether' (Shestov 1982, p. 149). 'When Dostoevsky hung on the cross', Shestov continues, 'he doubted everything and doubted to the end' (Shestov 2000, p. 49).<sup>19</sup> For Shestov in his mature phase, Dostoevsky was first of all a man of hope, as that enigmatic transformation that he called the regeneration of his convictions had taken place in him. 'Not love is God, but God is love'. That is why the faith in 'humanity' that Dostoevsky had taken with him to the penal colony the writer brought back with him unbroken (Shestov 1982, pp. 163–169).

The shift in Shestov's thinking of Dostoevsky may be compared to the movement in Bakhtin's thought between 1929 and 1963 from interpersonal dialogue to impersonal body-oriented carnival, which is indicated in his revisions of the book on Dostoevsky. In the new chapter four of the revised book, Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is considered within the European tradition of classical antiquity, including the genre of Menippean satire and the genre of Socratic dialogue. Bakhtin emphasizes 'the deep bond' between the literature of classical antiquity and carnivalistic folklore. The carnival sense of the world, according to him, permeates these genres 'from top to bottom'. The specific *carnival sense of the world* for Bakhtin encapsulates a mighty life-creating and transforming power (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 107). Bakhtin distinguishes a representation of abnormal moral and psychic states of man—'insanity of all sorts'—as one of the significant characteristics of the menippea. Thus, highlighting the originality of the genre and its importance for the development of European novelistic prose, Bakhtin writes: 'Here, the content of life was poured into a stable form that possessed an *inner logic*, insuring the indissoluble linking up of all its elements' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 119). Imperatively, as I shall discuss below, Bakhtin related carnivalised literature to the genre of poetics. With reference to Dostoevsky, he described the menippea as the genre of 'ultimate questions' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 115).

Bakhtin's philosophy of language undertook a radical revision of the fundamental philosophical conception of poetic discourse. The philosopher proposed a way to reformat our understanding of language in terms of dialogue, polyphony and otherness. His investigation of the stylistic nature of the novel and dialogic orientation of language aimed to reveal the artistic uniqueness of discourse in Dostoevsky's novelistic prose. In return, Shestov's introspective analysis of Dostoevsky's creative mind stimulated by his intellectual and spiritual searching contributed to the thinker's affirmation of the multiplicity of truths and culminated in his discovery of the ever changing and ineffable 'created freedom'. In this unfinalised dialogic interaction, the philosopher's 'I' encountered the divine 'You', the Creator. As George Pattison observed, religious existentialist philosophers have important affinities with the dialogical philosophy of language. Language means that we are answerable, each to the other (Pattison 1999, p. 270).

## **Toward the unsaying: Bakhtin's 'utterances' and Shestov's notion of 'the unseen'**

On 31 October 1838 Dostoevsky wrote to his brother Mikhail:

<sup>19</sup>Regarding the developments that took place in Shestov's reading of Dostoevsky, see: Ogden (2021b, pp. 201–206).



Philosophy should not be conceived as a simple mathematical equation in which the unknown is nature. Note, that a poet in a transport of inspiration is seeking God and consequently serves the purpose of philosophy. Consequently, poetic ecstasy is the ecstasy of philosophy. Consequently, philosophy is the same as poetry, only a higher degree of it! (Dostoevsky 1982, p. 54)

In 1970 in his conversation with Sergei Bocharov, Bakhtin admitted that in his 1929 book on Dostoevsky he was unable to speak freely and directly about the most important questions.<sup>20</sup> When the interviewer asked what questions they were, Bakhtin replied: ‘Philosophical ones, the ones that tormented Dostoevsky his entire life, the existence of God’ (Bocharov 1999, p. 41). As Shestov understood it—and Bakhtin would probably agree—the main question for Dostoevsky was the existence of God. Dostoevsky’s works astounded Bakhtin first of all by their extraordinary diversity of types and varieties present in their most extreme expression (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 203). Bakhtin’s fascination with an armoury of attitudes and forms of ritualistic expression stimulated his interest in the carnivalistic tradition in literature. He maintained that the literature of the eighteenth century was of essential importance for Dostoevsky’s assimilation of the carnival tradition (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 158). The philosopher revealed carnival undertones in Dostoevsky’s novels:

Sharp dialogic syncrises, extraordinary and provocative plot situations, crises and turning points and moral experimentation, catastrophes and scandals, contrasts and oxymoronic combinations are what determine the entire plot and compositional structure of Dostoevsky’s novels. (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 156)

Arguing that it was precisely the method of carnivalisation with its pathos of change and renewal that permitted Dostoevsky to penetrate the deepest layers of man and human relationships, Bakhtin declared that in Dostoevsky’s creative act a vivid carnival vision of life is born (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 166, 161). Describing the tools Dostoevsky created for the realisation of his polyphonic artistic design, Bakhtin proposed that one of the methods the writer used is the ‘inner unfinalizability’ of his characters, which embodies their capacity to grow. Dostoevsky’s heroes, in Bakhtin’s view, are internally *unfinalized* for self-consciousness cannot be finalised *from within* (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 73). In particular, the method of carnivalisation made possible the creation of the *open* structure of the great dialogue (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 177).

In Bakhtin’s later works, his definition of dialogism is that of ‘the utterance’, which always creates something that had not been there before. Juxtaposed dialogically, utterances may depend on such things as context and situation for their meaning (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293). In Bakhtin’s account, words in live communication are utterances, vital and flourishing expressions (Petrilli 2016, p. 329). In his essay ‘The

<sup>20</sup>There was a thirty-four year interval between the original publication of Bakhtin’s *Problemy Tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* [Problems of Dostoevsky’s Creativity] (1929) and its revised version, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963). Like many intellectuals in Russia who lived under Stalinism, Bakhtin was exiled and banished from official culture, and he could not publish again until 1963. After he was arrested in 1929, Bakhtin was first exiled to Kustanaj between Siberia and Kazakhstan, and then, in 1936, to Saransk in Mordovia. Bakhtin’s name was critically rehabilitated in 1974, a year before his death. See: Petrilli (2016, p. 315).

Problem of Speech Genres', in which polyphony is considered as a sociological construct, he suggests that 'any utterance [...] reveals to us many half-concealed or completely concealed words of others with varying degrees of foreignness' (Bakhtin 1986a, p. 97). For Bakhtin, dialogue at the level of definition denotes a transcendental principle of discourse, as the condition of communication and of the creation of meaningful utterances (Hirschkop and Shepherd 1989, p. 6). This is how in 1961, Bakhtin described utterances' continuous and transformative characteristics:

The utterance is never a reflection or expression of something given and already existing outside it. It always creates something that before it never was, something absolutely new and unrepeatable, besides it always has an attitude toward a value (toward the true, the good, the beautiful etc.). But something created is always created from something given (language, an observed phenomenon of actuality, an experienced feeling, the speaking subject himself, prepared in this world view etc.). Everything given is transformed into what is created. (Bakhtin 1996, pp. 329–60, p. 330)

For Bakhtin, utterance carries the need for constant and continual human growth. Just as dialogue is encountered among voices, there could be different voices in the same utterance; a multi-voiced utterance within the same consciousness (Petrilli 2016, p. 329). As Susan Petrilli noted, 'Bakhtin studies Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel because he is fascinated by its capacity to depict dialogism in a single voice, in a single utterance' (Petrilli 2016, p. 333). In his analysis of Dostoevsky's artistic world, Bakhtin stresses dialogic openness and the unfinalisability of dialogue. He states that 'At the level of his religious-utopian worldview Dostoevsky carries dialogue into eternity, conceiving of it as eternal co-rejoicing, co-admiration, concord' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 252). In other words, dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end.

In 1876 Dostoevsky wrote that 'The idea of immortality is life itself, living life, its final formula and the source of truth and of wholesome consciousness for mankind' (Dostoevsky 1982, p. 374). From Shestov's point of view, in Dostoevsky's struggle against the dogmas of morality, the writer offered arguments that he could not have thought of before his experience of penal servitude (Ogden 2021a). 'All the years he [Dostoevsky] spent in Siberia during which he read only one book—Holy Scripture—were not wasted', noted Shestov (Shestov 1969b, p. 302). There, Shestov wrote, 'In the galleys and the underworld, had been born within him [Dostoevsky] a great hunger for God which lived long; there he fought a great fight, the fight of life against death' (Shestov 1916, p. 75).

An attempt to access the realm beyond knowledge and language, Shestov's mature thought aspired to surpass metaphysics and advanced toward a third non-predicative way—a new dimension of thought. Aiming to liberate the mind by taking it 'out on the shoreless sea of imagination' (Shestov 1920, p. 38), Shestov's thought alluded to the possibility to 'go even further' (Ogden 2021b, p. 224). In the style of Kierkegaard, who defined possibility as an antidote to despair (Kierkegaard 1989, p. 43),<sup>21</sup> Shestov's spiritual journey became 'a mad struggle for possibility' of the di-

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard viewed possibility as the most difficult of categories, stating that 'in possibility all things are equally possible and anyone truly brought up by possibility has grasped the terrifying just as the

vine salvation (Shestov 1969b, p. 21).<sup>22</sup> Stemming from Kierkegaard's definition of faith as 'an insane struggle for the possible', Shestov conceived of faith as 'the possibility of the impossible' (Shestov 1982, p. 282; Shestov, MS 2106, Tome IX, Facs. 51, 1939, p. 55). He wrote: 'Faith is a new dimension of thought, unknown and foreign to speculative philosophy, which opens the way to the Creator of all earthly things, the source of all possibilities, to the One for Whom there are no boundaries between the possible and the impossible' (Shestov 1969b, p. 27). In Shestov's view, the truths of faith are given freely, and they are accepted freely (Shestov 2016, p. 318). The advancement of Shestov's thought into the 'unseen' dimension manifested itself as the discovery of an unthinkable, unknown possibility, which would free one's mind from the limitations of speculative thinking.<sup>23</sup> In the 'second dimension of thought,' words no longer have fixed meanings; everything here must be re-created, begun all over again. In the culminative assertion of his position, Shestov identified faith with freedom, which he understood as a gift of an unlimited divine power granted to us by God (Shestov 1982, p. 258).

In Shestov's mature thought, the concept of faith as the second dimension of thought shifted to the centre of his philosophical worldview. The thinker's paradoxical view of reality, inclusive of the second, 'unseen' dimension, aspired to be susceptible to infinite changes. Thus, in the words of Jean-Luc Marion, the divine truth is the experience of incomprehension and it is necessary for a man to know how to unknow (Marion 1999, p. 36). Already in his early works, Shestov's writing revealed apophatic undertones: 'Nevertheless, there are other yearnings. Man's heart is suddenly possessed by a longing for the fantastic, the unforeseen, for that which cannot be foreseen' (Shestov 1916, p. 172). But in his last book, *Athens and Jerusalem* (1938), Shestov's request is even more urgent and pronounced: 'he who wishes to venerate must learn, before everything else, the "great art" of not seeing' (Shestov 2016, p. 300). In the philosopher's final years, his personal quest into infinity, groundlessness and the 'possibility of the impossible' came to the foreground of the contemporary apophatic discourse.

In Bakhtin's view, which may correspond to Shestov's discovery of the 'unseen' dimension, Dostoevsky possessed an extraordinary gift for hearing the dialogue of his epoch. In the spirit of Kirpotin, Bakhtin maintained that 'in eternity, according to Dostoevsky, all is simultaneous, everything coexists' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 29). According to him, Dostoevsky 'attempted to hear the voice-ideas of the future, trying to divine them, so to speak, from the place prepared for them in the dialogue of the present, just as it is possible to divine a future, as yet unuttered response in an already unfolded dialogue' (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 90). In the essay titled 'Author and Hero in

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smiling', and as long as there is struggle there is always a possibility of defeat. See: Kierkegaard (2015, pp. 188–189).

<sup>22</sup>Shestov's distinct awareness of the divine secrets of being could be rooted in his early reading of Talmudic narratives and other texts of mystics and writers of the Jewish tradition of *Aggadah*. To learn more about *Aggadah*, described by Gershom G. Scholem as 'a popular mythology of the Jewish Universe', see: Scholem (1941).

<sup>23</sup>Derived from the notion of the 'time out of joint' in his reading of Shakespeare, Shestov related it to Dostoevsky's motif of the 'regeneration of one's convictions' and Nietzsche's 'revaluation of all values', advancing this concept in his notion of the 'second dimension of thought', see: Ogden (2021b, pp. 48–66).

Aesthetic Activity’, Bakhtin applied apophatic terms when he spoke about God, as for him God cannot be known (Bakhtin 1990, p. 144). For Bakhtin, however, like for Shestov, the meaning of ‘unfinalizability’ itself remained unfinalised (Morson 1986, p. 177).

Accordingly, for Shestov, Dostoevsky was and remained on the eve of a great truth (Shestov 1916, pp. 80–81). Shestov did not agree with Soloviev that Dostoevsky was ‘the prophet’.<sup>24</sup> In his article ‘The Gift of Prophecy’ (1906) [*Prorocheskii dar*], dedicated to the twenty-fifth anniversary of Dostoevsky’s death, Shestov proposed that Dostoevsky knew he was not a prophet, but he wanted to be one, ‘he wanted people to listen to him and cry “Hosanna,” because he thought that if men had ever cried “Hosanna” to anyone, then there was no reason why he, Dostoevsky, should be denied the honour’ (Shestov 1916, p. 75). Shestov’s primary concern with Dostoevsky was the nature of the transformative movement in the writer’s worldview in relation to his idea of the immortality of the human soul.

Opinions vary among scholars as to whether Bakhtin’s philosophy had a theological dimension. In his book on Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin pointed out the possibility of ‘the artistically organized coexistence and interaction of spiritual diversity’ (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 31).<sup>25</sup> Randall A. Poole suggested that in developing his ideas, Bakhtin drew on the apophatic tradition in Orthodox theology, and Pavel Florensky’s concept of personhood, in particular (Poole 2001, p. 151, p. 160). Other scholars commented on the presence of ‘a feeling for faith’ in Bakhtin’s thought (Felch and Contino 2001, p. 19). Similarly, David Patterson suggested that ‘Bakhtin operates from a generally religious and distinctly Christian viewpoint’ and asserted that the philosopher’s investigation of the dialogical dimensions of literature manifested itself as a revelation of spirit (Patterson 1988, p. 3). Patterson therefore perceives Bakhtin’s work as a ‘religious quest into the relation between literature and spirit’ (Patterson 1988, p. 3). From Caryl Emerson’s point of view, however, Bakhtin was not a religious philosopher, but rather a ‘moral philosopher of narrative’, even though he used such terms as *dukh* [spirit] and *dusha* [soul] in his writings (Emerson 1994, p. 222; Emerson 2020, p. 608, p. 615).<sup>26</sup> Crucially, as Galin Tihanov noted, it is the transformative energy of Bakhtin’s version of dialogue that sets him apart from other linguists and thinkers (Tihanov 2018, p. 5).

Like Bakhtin, Shestov rarely discussed personal religious issues with his friends and colleagues, although the views on Judaism and Christianity which he expressed in his writings were strikingly original (Oppo 2020, p. 250). The philosopher ad-

<sup>24</sup>In *Three Speeches in Memory of Dostoevsky* (1881–1883), Vladimir Soloviev famously referred to Dostoevsky as a prophet.

<sup>25</sup>While working on the book during the Stalin era, Bakhtin was faced with the increasing centralisation and brutal soviet authoritarian forms of oppression. His argument for the importance of diversity and pluralism could also be interpreted in this context.

<sup>26</sup>Even though Bakhtin was wary of the ‘free-thinking’ religious questioning of Russian thought, he participated in the gatherings of such religious and philosophical groups as *Voskresenie* [Resurrection], *Vol'fila* (Petrogradskaia Vol'naya Filosofskaya Assotsiatsia) [Free Philosophical Association of Petrograd], and the Brotherhood of St. Seraphim of Sarov, where he was engaged with a number of religious thinkers, including Alexander Meier, Sergei Askoldov and Georgy Fedotov. See: Dimpleby (1996, p. 41). In the years preceding the first publication of the book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin gave several lectures on Russian philosophy, religion and literature.

vanced his religious worldview in the development of one of the main themes of his philosophy—the incommensurability of faith and reason. In Shestov's account, 'religious truth cannot justify itself before reason, and it does not need to justify itself before anyone' (Shestov 1982, p. 212). For him, the twofold nature of man—as manifested in the I-Thou relation between man and God—is an incomprehensible mystery.<sup>27</sup> Going back to Kirpotin's observations, in which a 'single-voiced' Dostoevsky and a 'multi-voiced' Dostoevsky harmoniously co-exist, one of the key arguments in his aforementioned book is that man (i.e., the human being) is at the centre of all F. M. Dostoevsky's studies. 'What is man?—this is the question, to which he [Dostoevsky] was seeking an answer in his concentrated reflection, in his sincere conversations, in the books of other thinkers and in the creations of great writers', Kirpotin wrote (Kirpotin 1947, p. 5). The problems of human beings and human life were also primary to Bakhtin's and Shestov's discussions on Dostoevsky. As John D. Caputo noted, scrutinising the author's biography for clues to understanding what was in their books might be a useful place to start, but it may not be a place to finish (Caputo 2018, p. 29). 'Ultimately, what matters is to understand not the authorial subjectivity but the author's subject matter' (Caputo 2018, p. 30). Whereas Bakhtin's thought strived to uncover 'the higher level of organic unity', in which open, becoming, unresolved and undetermined human voices could coexist in free unfinalisability (Bakhtin 1986a, p. 180), the purpose of Shestov's intellectual inquiry and spiritual striving was 'to recover possibility of a freedom towards life (*Freiheit zum Leben*), as opposed to the Heideggerian *Freiheit zum Tode* (freedom towards death)' (Fotiade 2020, p. 474).

## Conclusion

Owing to Dostoevsky's so-called 'psychological discoveries' and now almost universal recognition as one of the outstanding masters of literary art, the fate of the writer's masterpieces is intertwined with the destiny of world literature as a whole (Steinberg 1966, p. 49). In twenty-first-century English-speaking scholarship, a number of works explored new approaches that would allow more nuanced readings of Dostoevsky to emerge. One such approach is to read Dostoevsky dialogically, probing, interrogating and challenging him (Pattison and Thompson 2001, p. 11). For, in a Bakhtinian world, to find a voice of one's own, there have to be other voices allowed in (Williams 2008, p. 119).

Coming from different standpoints, Bakhtin's reading and Shestov's reading of Dostoevsky complement and deepen each other in most unexpected ways. Both inspired by Dostoevsky's writing, Bakhtin's and Shestov's philosophical visions underwent significant transformations throughout each of their lives. On the one hand, in Bakhtin's case, his monologic-polyphonic discourse and the insistence on the plurality and diversity of voices paved the way to the idea of unfinalised utterance and the notion of a 'great dialogue' becoming the essential concepts of his philosophy of language. As we have discussed, during the thirty-four years that intervened between the

<sup>27</sup>On the affinity between Shestov's thought and the philosophy of Martin Buber, see: Ogden (2021b, pp. 192–195).

two editions of his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin reworked and expanded his ideas, thereby including a new chapter on the subject of carnival. Bakhtin advanced his idea of polyphony into the concept of the utterance and his conception of the novel in relation to the carnivalistic genre of literature, as well as his views of the history of the novel. Shestov's dialogic interaction with the *other I* in his reading of Dostoevsky, on the other hand, helped him to uncover a fundamental transformative capability of thought, which was expressed in the advancement of his philosophical worldview and marked by a conceptual paradigm: the regeneration of convictions/ awakening/ the second dimension of thought. In Shestov's account, the internal dialogue that took place between the conscious and the unconscious counterparts of Dostoevsky's artistic mind brought about substantial change to the writer's philosophical vision. First appearing as a distinct theme in his early publications, Shestov's idea of a sudden inner transformation was activated in his later writing, in which the notion of the 'awakening' found its metaphorical form in the concepts of 'the second vision' or 'the second dimension of thought' (i.e., the gift of the Angel of Death).

As we have considered, Bakhtin and Shestov in their original ways appropriated Dostoevsky into their philosophical worldviews. However, while both thinkers had an affinity for Nietzsche, the standpoints of their engagement with the German philosopher's work were profoundly different. Similarly, with respect to Kant, Bakhtin's and Shestov's views—while crossing each other half way—arrived at dissimilar conclusions. Drawing on Kirpotin's observations, Bakhtin established an *I* to '*the other*' relation as an interchangeable dialogic interaction between author and hero.<sup>28</sup> Comparably, Shestov's 'wandering through Dostoevsky's soul' embodied his own search for God, his 'twofold *I*' in conversation. As I have suggested, Bakhtin's dialogue with the *other* corresponded to Shestov's dialogue with the *other* self. Furthermore, as this study has uncovered, the reposition of the boundaries between *I* and *Thou*, human and the divine, which occurred in Shestov's mature writings, could be comparable to Bakhtin's interactive relationship between author and hero.

Whereas Bakhtin focused on the structure, composition and methodology of Dostoevsky's novel, Shestov's interest centred on the psychological and existential value of the text. His reading of Dostoevsky was dynamic, mirrored by the developments taking place in his own worldview (Ogden 2021b). By removing the traditional framework between philosophy, art, psychology and biography, Shestov's philosophy-art made a personal and bold attempt to deal with the problems of human tragedy and conflict. His philosophical inquiry, carried out artistically involved his creative attempts at de-construction and re-construction of meaning. But in the thinker's struggle to find his 'created freedom,' manifested in his tragic dialogue with God, there was no end, and there could be no end (Shestov 2016, p. 330).

Both philosophers valued in Dostoevsky an artist, whose work revolutionised the genre of the novel. The two philosophers agreed on the importance of Dostoevsky for European culture. Pluralism and multiplicity were highly valued by both Bakhtin and Shestov. As we have seen, each of the two visions of Dostoevsky's artistry as a novelist reflected their personal convictions and values. Both investigators were interested in Dostoevsky's challenge with the 'question of God', although, as it has been

<sup>28</sup> As Tzvetan Todorov observed, 'Bakhtin does rely on previous critics in his interpretation of Dostoevsky, but he systematically exceeds their assertions'. See: Todorov (1984, p. 103).

discussed, Bakhtin did not address the question directly. Central to both Bakhtin and Shestov, the openness and unfinalisability of apophatic unknowing and the relationship between the human and the divine were distinct themes in their discussions on Dostoevsky. Whereas Bakhtin emphasised the unfinalised potential of Dostoevsky's characters, Shestov's apophatic aspirations found expression in the notion of the 'unseen' and his notion of faith as the 'second dimension of thought'.

'At the heart of any dialogue is the conviction that what is exchanged has meaning' (Holquist 2002, p. 38). In the dialogue conducted in this article, through dialogic juxtaposition, each of the two independent worldviews have been transformed into the reality of the other. In this unparalleled topsy-turvy world, where Bakhtin's ideas interact with Shestov's, the thinkers' dialogue with Dostoevsky is unfinalised—left on the threshold of utterance and on the eve of a 'great truth'. As I have tried to show, despite their different methods, standpoints, philosophical views, and seemingly antagonizing nature of their observations, Shestov and Bakhtin arrived at a number of conclusions in their readings of Dostoevsky, which together contributed to a better understanding of the complexity of Dostoevsky's world. Dostoevsky's art has survived all the adversities of the past century. His work received diverse readings in Russia and in Europe and his words (whether or not they were or weren't reflected in the voices of his characters) are still as meaningful today as they were in his lifetime. The writer's face was turned towards the future, and in all his writings he discussed events which had yet to come (Zernov 1944, p. 97). Thus, as Bakhtin specified, Dostoevsky's influence has still far from reached its culmination (Bakhtin 2019a, p. 291). After all, as Shestov noted, 'it is only upon the approach of an outside soul that another's soul becomes invisible' (Shestov 1916, p. 145).

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## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The author declares that she has no conflict of interest or competing interest.

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