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Author: Aneta Zacharz

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ANETA ZACHARZ

On the Way to Nowhere – Reflections Upon the Impossible of Identity

The primacy of reason and the primacy of faith, Athens and Jerusalem – these are centuries-old oppositions between which human thought has been oscillating through history. The choice of one opposite stance triggers the negation of the other. Leo Shestov suggests abandoning of all doubts and calls for absolute commitment to Jerusalem, or in other words, for absolute faith. The search for rational solutions to problems of existence and the need to escape from uncertainties resulted in the development of critical thinking in relation to what Shestov terms the Crisis of *ratio*.¹

In his book titled *Apotheosis of Uncertainty* Shestov verbalises his conviction that what underlies all philosophical systems is the desire of “understanding.” He claims that human vocation is not to “understand” the unknown but to become acquainted with that unknown through experience. Shestov points

¹ Twentieth century has been a time of great and radical changes, it has been a time of philosophical doubts and hesitations; it has been a time of search for the spiritual salvation of mankind. This fever of looking for reasonable solutions and escaping from the chaos of thoughts and uncertainties, from “the death of God,” “the agony of Christianity,” “the twilight of the West,” “the fall of civilisation,” “rebellion of the masses,” from “the falling night of the new Middle Ages” — resulted in the critical manner of thinking, the thinking in relation to the Crisis. Shestovian thought places itself in that canon of philosophical speculation, in the canon of thinking towards the Crisis. It oscillates between the question of the why(s) and the wherefore(s) of this ideological “recession”, and the answer which is to point out senses which would change the hitherto existing paradigm of intellectual perception. This act of thinking in relation to the Crisis is the constant search for the primitive *arche* — the substructure of the whole European culture of reason (see Cezary Wodziński, *Ateny, Jerozolima, Rzym ...*, in Lew Szestow, *Ateny i Jerozolima* (Kraków: Znak, 1993, s. 8)). All quotations in the article and in the footnotes were translated into English by the author.

out that “no knowledge, no science can give that, what is brought by darkness.”² Light is not able to reveal what lurks in the cracks of our existence. Light may only set in order what is on the “veneer” of reality. Such a tension, the tension between the emotional and the rational, between the expressible and the ineffable may culminate in liminal experience, the experience of the sphere beyond a discourse, one that does not lend itself to discursivisation. Such an experience, reminiscent of the experience of the Kantian sublime, seems to propel the intellectual efforts of such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Duns Scotus, St. John of the Cross, and Melville. Shestov writes that in the world organised by logos two forces influence every human being: centripetal and centrifugal.³ The former enables us to situate ourselves in the context of the “visible” world. Everything that leads to this self-placement is desirable. Only those experiences which activate the centripetal force, such as fear of the ineffable or the ordering power of tradition, are cultivated. The centripetal force is the factor that enables us to believe in the possibility of “recognition,” “explanation” and “definition.” It calls into being the sphere of the “understood” and of the “defined.” Everything that casts a shadow upon the structure of the world is marginalized. Conversely, the centrifugal force allows one to acknowledge the shadowed sphere, the sphere in which ratio proves impotent.

In order to exemplify his theory, in *The Overcoming of the Obvious*, Shestov quotes a parable about the Angel of Death. The Angel of Death, who comes to a man to take his soul, is all eyes. It happens, however, that the Angel of Death⁴ comes too early. He leaves the soul in the man’s body intact but before

² Lew Szestow, *Apoteoza nieoczywistości* (Londyn: Kontra, 1983), p. 88

³ Lew Szestow, *Sola Fide. Tylko przez wiarę* (Warszawa: Znak, 1993), pp. 58–59.

⁴ “In one old book of wisdom it was said [...] that the Angel of Death who comes to a man so as to separate the soul from the body, is all covered with eyes. Why? Why does the Angel need so many eyes — He, who saw in Heaven everything, he, who has nothing to see on the earth? And so [...] He has those eyes not for himself. It happens that the Angel of Death, who comes to take a soul, convinces himself that He has appeared too early, that the time has not come yet to man, so as to leave the earth. He does not touch the soul; He does not even come into sight of that soul, but before the departure, He imperceptibly leaves that man one more pair of eyes from His innumerable ones. And then, suddenly, the (gifted) man starts to see more than the others, more than he/she can see with his/her old eyes; he/she starts to see something completely new. And he/she sees the new in the new way, (but) not like (ordinary) people see but like the creatures from “other worlds” (see), in such a manner that this new is not “the necessary” but “the free” — it means that *it is* and at the same time *it is not*, it appears when it disappears and disappears when it appears. Given by birth, the former eyes, “as in all of us” testify about that “new” something completely different than the eyes left by the Angel. But, as the other senses and our reason are associated with the ordinary seeing, and every personal or collective “experience” of man is also associated with the ordinary seeing, that new seeing seems to be lawless, absurd, fantastic — simply a phantom or hallucination of swinging imagination. It seems to be that the next moment madness will come: not the poetic one — the inspired madness about which even the course

his departure, He leaves the man an additional pair of eyes. And then, suddenly, the (gifted) man starts to see more than others, more than he could see with his old eyes. He sees the world in a new way, his vision is no longer human: it is a perspective of an alien visitor, of a stranger from out of this world. What he sees *is* and at the same time *is not*; it appears when it disappears and it disappears when it appears.⁵ What he sees is not a substance from which a shape emerges. It is pure negation because *there is nothing* in what he sees. What the man sees with his new eyes is chaos because his gaze is not a differentiating vision. As Jolanta Brach-Czaina suggests in *Cracks in Existence* the very idea of differentiation is based upon the act of separating objects from the background.⁶ Therefore, the eye of recognition,⁷ the rational eye, does not penetrate, while the new pair of “angelic eyes” allows penetration. They bring the man to the sphere of the new. The necessity that results from the unrejectable angelic gift is the approval of difficult imperfection. That necessity of entering the sphere beyond ratio requires the suspension of the old gaze and, at the same time, isolation from the vision of old.⁸ Therefore, centripetal force makes the act of opening oneself so difficult. The new eyes usher in a period of new life. Such an opening, such a “birth” of sorts, is the active waiting for the unknown. A continuous and permanent movement towards the unreflecting is constituted. Such waiting gives uncertainty and guarantees it.⁹ The Angelic gift, the

books on aesthetics and philosophy speak and which under the name of Eros, Mania or ecstasy was described and justified where (it) should be and by whom, but that madness for which they put people into the madhouse/lunatic asylum. And then, the fight between the natural and non-natural (supernatural) sight begins, the result of which seems to be as problematic and mysterious as its beginning.” (Leo Shestov, *Na wiesach Iowa*, trans. Aneta Zacharz, Paris: YMCA-Press, 1975, p. 27.)

⁵ See Lew Szestow, “Przezwyciężenie oczywistości,” *Na wiesach Iowa* (Paryż: YMCA-Press, 1975), p. 27, in *Apoteoza nieoczywistości*, p. 219.

⁶ The background is “the undersoil on which something may come to existence. But it is not the one that is fertilised but the one that is the naked soil of events and occurrences yet unknown. In the background lurks the uncertainty. The background is a substance from which a shape emerges. It is pure negation because there is nothing in it and if there were anything that could appear because of the nature of the background, it would not belong to it. It is chaos because it does not differentiate anything and because the very idea of differentiation appears as the act of separation from the background.” (Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia* (Warszawa: PIW, 1992), p. 108.)

⁷ Recognition is only identification based upon one to one relations.

⁸ As Jolanta Brach-Czaina writes: “[...] there is no need for opening up to the events that attract us because we are always open to them and ready to participate in them. The necessity of opening assumes the preceding closing and isolation – that means lack of acceptance. If *being* requires opening to itself as the absolute condition, it means that imperfection is its indispensable feature. Therefore, it is so difficult to open oneself onto it.” (Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, pp. 34–35.)

⁹ “The experience of the first exit as the experience of passing from what is known and domesticated to what is unknown and strange, as the experience of initiation into destiny.

acceptance of which is an act of initiation, imparts to the man of Shestovian parable knowledge about himself as of a being that longs for the unknown and who dwells in uncertainty. This in-between sphere is a liminal sphere between the dark and the light, but belongs nowhere; it *is* and it *is not*, it appears when it disappears and disappears when it appears. Finding himself in the sphere of unknown the Shestovian man dwells in the realm of verbal and mental silence. To be born as the author of *Cracks in Existence* says means to accept our own separateness.¹⁰ To be born means to manifest oneself in one's identity, an identity "that not only allows for a multiplicity of incarnations, but also demands it."¹¹ In its strangeness, the domain of the uncertain appears to be hostile because it may blur the sight of the real in terms of I-see-what-I-know.¹² The discourse of hierarchized structures makes it difficult for us to see "beyond" the *ratio*. Categorical discourse postulates thinking in terms of necessity. Dwelling in the world of *ratio*, one necessarily follows the rules of *ratio*, whether reflectively or unreflectively. According to Shestov such behaviour takes its root in amartology, the reflection upon the original sin.¹³ The sense of the original sin lies in illegality of insight, which took place when the Tree of Death threw a shadow upon the Tree of Life and rendered man obliged to entrust his orientation to reason. By that breach, man lost the opportunity of participating in the Absolute. This eradication from the absolute left man with a language incapable of expressing and describing what lies beyond "the formed" and "the explained." Such a rational paradigm of thinking places us in a being towards death. The incapacity of language becomes a tangible manifestation of absence, which is best illustrated by the Levinasian concept of *the Other*. Thus, in order to make possible human access to Meaning, language must annihilate what it

A continuous and permanent movement towards the unconscious is by then constituted. It gives uncertainty. It guarantees it. From the very beginning in the existential condition anxiousness is inscribed. That is taught by the act of initiation. So, the original initiation implants in us knowledge about ourselves as creatures that miss the unknown and who dwell in uncertainty. Tempted by the mystery, awakened by its alluring radiation, we are confronted with the unknowable." (Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, p. 37.)

¹⁰ "To be born means to accept and confirm our own separateness but also to experience strangeness. To move from place to place – always as if not our, to be aware that separateness or even strangeness of the particular beings may be good that is inscribed into the whole, to which we belong." (Jolanta Brach-Chaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, p. 40.)

¹¹Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, p. 69.

¹² See Jolanta Brach-Czaina, "Wnikanie," in *Szczeliny istnienia*.

¹³ "The sin is knowledge. The moment when the first human consumed the fruit of cognisance, he gained knowledge but he lost freedom. Man does not need cognisance. To pose questions and problems, to demand facts and answers, means that man is not free. To cognise means to cognise necessity. Knowledge and freedom are not compatible." (B. Fondane, "Recontres avec Lew Chestov" (Paris: 1982), pp. 126–127, in Lew Szesstow, *Ateny i Jerozolima*, p. 31.)

describes in a way that would render the encountered being as emptiness and inexpressibility. Understanding in the categories of *ratio*, is tantamount to the death of meaning. By labelling being, man annihilates truths present in those beings, and by that, he sentences them to exile from the world of discourse.¹⁴ Only in that exile do beings acquire a distance from discourse and they are placed in the context of uncertainty. Thus, language is a negation of meaning. In its original sense the negation results from the Levinasian desire because it is not language that is asked questions or searched but it is itself that, searches and asks.¹⁵ In this way distance bestows sense upon language. The absence of one to one relations between word and object breeds our desire to move into the sphere of negation. To say nothing is the only hope of saying everything.¹⁶ Realisation of apophatic thinking is not simple because we feel safer when operating in a cataphatic paradigm. Even if we put the subject of a word to death, there remains an idea of that subject functioning in, one-to-one relation with the word. Then, the absent becomes present by transformation of the absent into language. Blanchot writes that language of literature, which combines in itself both uneasiness and contradictions, tries to talk about things and problems that cannot be talked about. By this means, language tries to go beyond all limitations even if its user is “aware” of them. Such a language is “aware” that “the infinite absence of understanding could not be equal to the limited and defined presence of a word.”¹⁷

The aim of the “centrifugal” language would be to evoke “understanding of the movement that escapes definitions.”¹⁸ It would like to reach the ideal absence of sense, completely present in that absence and for that absence. The awareness of that language opening towards the absent is the starting point for the act of thinking towards and from death. Language then, becomes the execution of negation. By that, its principle is the *lack of what it lacks*. The sentence “when I talk, death talks inside me”¹⁹ is an attempt to express the indispensable distance between the speaker and what is being described. That

¹⁴ As Maurice Blanchot says: “[...] a word gives being but it gives being lacking being. A word is the absence of that *being*; it is its nothingness, it is what had been left when it lost being. It means, a word is only a fact that a word is absent.” (Maurice Blanchot, *Wokół Kafki* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 1996) p. 28.)

¹⁵ See Maurice Blanchot, *Wokół Kafki* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 1996), p. 30.

¹⁶ By means of the absence of one to one relations this extant breeds a desire of living in the sphere of negation because “if about things one says only what makes them nothing, then to say nothing is the only hope of saying everything. Language perceives that it owes its sense not to what exists but just to the distance against the existence and it feels the temptation of stopping at that distance of getting to the very essence of negation. It is tempted to make with nothing everything.” (Maurice Blanchot, *Wokół Kafki*, p. 30.)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

can be explained in terms of centrifugal force, which pushes our identity towards a new sphere of semiotic and semantic sensation. Semiotic, because of the symbolic nature of language experienced during the centrifugal movement; semantic, because of the multitude of transformations of relations holding between language and a “sign” which allows us to perceive “reality” in a number of ways. Owing to that, the experience of inexpressibility results in acts of thinking in terms of the search to sense beyond sense. Consequently, in the light of the desire to experience the ineffable what is Athenian falls in value. Athens and Jerusalem metaphorically parallel the Levinasian opposition between the myth of Odysseus and the parable about Abraham.²⁰ The expedition of Odysseus, having for its aim the return to Ithaca, is a parable of language in the Hellenic style. The searching language finds its *arche* of sense in itself. The journey of Odysseus is propelled by the centripetal force. Because it knows its destination, the journey is in fact passivity and a defined sojourn. It appears to be a parallel to the Levinasian “need.”²¹ This need results from an emptiness that can be quenched by the object of that need. Thus, only knowledge appears to be a fulfilment of the need of the human mind because it fills the empty space of the question with discursive structures, it domesticates the object of its transcendence and comes back to itself. The need of reason is appeased with the assimilation of the Other in the Same: what is known embraces what is unknown. Odysseus knows the answer to the question: where am I going? Conversely, Abraham does not know the answer but he abandons the search for what can be known and takes a road towards the unknown. “He initiates an uninterrupted movement towards the Other of the sense – different than the sense as a lingual ‘event’.”²² The experience of language in the biblical way is a renouncement, repudiation and negation. The wandering of Abraham is the search for the source of the sense “beyond-the-outspoken.” Therefore, the journey of Abraham is desire. As Levinas claims: it is a “reversed need” that cannot be satisfied. It assimilates the Same in the Other, transcends hierarchized discourse and transforms it to the ineffable. The only knowledge of Abraham is a *no-knowledge* of place.

Thus, the birth towards death is the rejection of the language that speaks about what is. At the same time the language of apophatic discourse is the search for the moment, which precedes language itself and which now is more than negation. Shestov seems to suggest that it is the search for the amartological pre-source. This language says that it does not represent. It *is*. So the aim of

²⁰ See Emmanuel Levinas, *O Bogu, który nawiedza myśl* (Kraków: Znak, 1994).

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *O Bogu, który nawiedza myśl*, pp. 14–19.

²² “Abraham initiates an uninterrupted movement towards the Other of the sense — different than the sense as a lingual ‘event’ — uninterrupted means impossible to break in the regress of the return to the starting point”. (Cezary Wodziński, *Hermes i Eros* (Warszawa: IFIS PAN, 1997), p. 130.)

that language is in the reverse of concepts, in understatement and unremitting interpretation and translation of what is written “with” a letter of the indistinctiveness. Deliverance *towards* death is not tantamount to the awakening *in* death. It is rather the act of closing oneself to the unknown; as the immanent delimits the transcendent, the language of reason delimits mutuality. Therefore, it is possible to say that mystical experience, which we go through using angelic eyes, brings knowledge, but this knowledge does not have a systemic character. It is a certain kind of intuition, vision or picture that cannot be transformed into a discourse. Such knowledge is silent. But paradoxically, this silence can be expressed, though partially, *only* by means of the words rejected earlier. Such calmness of words leads to transcendence, the absolute identity, that emerges from the dark and the absent (and) achieves triumphs in darkness and absence. The idea of the Infinity of transcendence leads thinking beyond itself and thus places our identity beyond itself. Thus, the more profound the revelation of the centrifugal force is, the more shapeless the illumination is. Such an illumination has a direct character, one of mystical experience. There is no room for any discourse because as Shestov writes, “[...] the Lord said that (He) would live in the dark. (His) native element is thus darkness of which man is afraid more than of any other thing.”²³ Therefore absolute identity can be gained only in the dark. According to Shestov contemplation of the “Divine” needs an unjustified transition from the state of ratio to the state of the ineffable. Such a transition becomes the experience of the not-articulated and leads to the domain where identity can be arrived at.

Birth towards death and from death delimits the sphere of spiritual hesitation. It sanctions the true use of the language of negation as the mediator, one that should express doubts about human existence. Being born towards death and from death means abandoning the tame world of discourse that is no longer, if it ever was, able to tell the story about what lies beyond the already crossed border. We no longer dwell in the frames of cataphatic paradigm. We start to look at the reality yielding to the centrifugal force that opens us to the mystical experience. And this mystical experience becomes the sphere where the search for identity can find its fulfilment. This identity is not the identity of Odysseus that knows its starting point and its end-point. It is the absolute one which could only be found outside Plato’s cave. It is the identity of Abraham that knows its beginning but which unremittingly, unceasingly and constantly asks about its “where.” It is the identity of the ceaseless wandering. Therefore, the place of our “real” *arche*, *telos*, identity lies beyond what is brought by the rational, in what is apophatic, in the sphere of uncertainty. Thus, the question about identity is absolute and ultimate and it calls for an absolute and ultimate answer – it requires the impossible. Shestov seems to suggest that

²³ Lew Szeszow, *Sola Fide*, p. 249.

to gain the absolute identity one has to abandon speech, and in silence has to enter the “negative” stage of life.

* * *

Answers to such questions as “what is your name?” “where do you come from?”, “what do you like?” depicts our place in the world of *ratio*. Answers to these questions can tell us about nothing but about our place of living or they can name or constitute our identity in the world of discourse. These answers imprison identity in the sphere of the visible, possible, and explainable and point out that the question about the “where” of identity – that is, about the sphere where identity is constituted, cannot be posed and answered while using the tools of *ratio*. Dwelling in the world of *ratio*, beings can talk only about identity of cataphatic order provoked to the centripetal force that pulls us to the tradition of logos and its rationalistic discourse. This order appears to be a realm in which there is nothing beyond the category. Therefore, the questions which arise are whether it is possible to distance ourselves from the tradition of *ratio* and from the language that is brought along by that tradition, whether we are able to reach the place in which the discursive identity falls in value, and whether it is possible to describe that very place. In the course of my argument I use elements of Shestovian, Levinasian, Blanchotian philosophies and the elements of Brach-Czaina’s thought so as to put forward the thesis that the place in which identity is constituted is the sphere of absence, liminality that calls to existence the realm of negation. It is performed in the way of the transformation of the possibility of language and perception of the world into the impossibility of that language and perception of the world and their annihilation.