

**J.M. Richardson and J. D. Rabb**

**Russian Existentialism and Vampire Slayage:  
A Shestovian Key to the Power and Popularity  
of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

Preface: (Stage directions. The two authors walk on stage, place their copies of the paper on waiting lecterns, walk in front of the lecterns and give a martial arts salute to the audience. They then perform a truncated version of the Chen Style International Competition Routine ending with another martial arts salute. They then return to their lecterns and begin reading, taking turns as appropriate.)

As is obvious from the preceding martial arts demonstration, unlike Sarah Michelle Gellar neither of us have any thing like a brown belt in Tae Kwon Do or any other martial art for that matter. In any case, our martial arts demonstration has very little to do with our paper. But then we argue that the martial arts so pervasive in the Buffyverse have very little to do with the basic theme of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Woops, having said this, we have just made our martial arts demonstration relevant to our paper. It follows that our demonstration both is and is not relevant to our paper. This last statement, though logically contradictory, is paradoxically not only consistent with our basic thesis, but actually exemplifies it, as will become evident. (Stage direction. Overhead projector is turned on, by author not reading at the moment, revealing the following quotation:)

“Freedom consists in the force and power not to admit evil into the world”  
(Shestov *Athens and Jerusalem* 256)

[1] In this paper, we argue that the Russian Existentialist, Lev Shestov, drawing, interestingly enough, on Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, provides the key to understanding not only Buffy’s power to vanquish vampires, but also the immense popularity of these profound stories. We also show why we regard the Buffyverse as a mytho-narrative for our time which cannot be easily dismissed, as for example in the superficial analysis provided by Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider’s “Feeling for Buffy: The Girl Next Door,” which claims that

“crucifixes, wooden stakes, and holy water are merely props and jokes that serve functional purposes in the forwarding of the serial narrative” (297).

[2] As Claude Levi-Strauss has argued in *The Raw and the Cooked*, one way to penetrate to the heart of a culture is to examine the way it feeds itself. Since North Americans of Buffy’s generation subsist on fast foods, we take seriously episode 6012, “Doublemeat Palace.” We note in passing that this has not always been done. In fact, even ardent defenders of season 6 have actually dismissed this particular episode. For example, Christopher Wisniewski, in “The (Un)Bearable Darkness of Buffy,” argues

I need to make an admission here: I take *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* very seriously; there are times when it seems like the one thing pure and good in the cold dark world of network television. And so I take exception to the criticism leveled against Season Six. While it did suffer from a few poorly-timed stumbles that disrupted its flow (see “Doublemeat Palace,” in which Buffy gets a job at a fast-food joint only to fall victim to a giant phallic monster growing out of an old woman’s head), it also soared [to] dizzying heights.

[3] We not only take *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* very seriously, but also regard the “Doublemeat Palace” episode as central to understanding the existential import of the entire series. There, after having been fired, Buffy doesn’t simply ask for her job back; rather she more perplexingly says, “I’d really like to not be fired anymore.” We take this as a significant clue, not just linguistic perversity. Though it is logically impossible both to be fired and not fired at one and the same time, such difficulties do not faze the Slayer. We contend that she is knowingly asking for the logically impossible, which she often has within her grasp. Interestingly enough, Lorraine the new manager, ignoring the logical impossibility of the request, happily complies with it, and smiling replies, “I think you can not be fired.”

[4] According to our Russian existentialist, Lev Shestov, if you have sufficient power and its creative freedom, the law of non-contradiction, sometimes called the law of contradiction [ $\sim(p \cdot \sim p)$ , it is not the case that both  $p$  and not  $p$ ], can, with some difficulty, be overcome by choosing unreason over reason. So for example,

although at time  $t_1$  Buffy was definitely fired (for doing a “Soylent Green” in the restaurant), her new boss, Lorraine, at time  $t_2$  (a later time), by uttering the words “I think you can not be fired.” makes it that at time  $t_1$  Buffy was never fired. The result is that at time  $t_1$  she was both fired and not fired, a clear violation of the law of non-contradiction. This is, by the way very much better than just getting your old job back! Vampire slayers often choose unreason when reason does not please them. This, of course, is a fundamental existential choice because reason, for obvious reasons, cannot make it for you; it is an authentic leap of faith in the Kierkegaardian sense. As Shestov argues, choosing to ignore the law of non-contradiction on some occasions is actually the rational, or at least the preferable, choice. Following Dostoevsky, he asks, “What do the laws of nature and of arithmetic matter to me when, for some reason or another, they do not please me?” (Shestov 1968a, 359, cf. Dostoevsky 1972, 23 ). In other words, why should we accept reason if unreason is, on occasion, say, more useful? Or as Dostoevsky himself also puts it, “I agree that two and two make four is an excellent thing; but to give everything its due, two and two make five is also a very fine thing” (Dostoevsky 1972, 23 ). Shestov is fond of quoting the irrational babbling of Dostoevsky’s underground man: “Let the whole world perish so long as I get my cup of tea” (Shestov 1975: 46, Dostoevsky 1972, 116). In “Prophecy Girl” (1012) during a pending apocalypse, Xander comes up with a logically similar though not so self-serving utterance: On hearing that “Once the Master gets free, the Hellmouth opens, the demons come to party, and everybody dies” Xander responds: “Uh, uh, I don't care. I'm sorry, I don't. Right now I gotta help Buffy.” It is, of course, logically impossible to help Buffy, or to have a cup of tea, if the whole world is destroyed.

[5] The *Angel* episode “I Will Remember You” (1008) illustrates that at least The Oracles know they have the power and creative freedom to do the logically impossible. The episode also provides an answer to the classical criticism of Shestov’s position. That criticism appears in James C. S. Wernham’s *Two Russian Thinkers: Berdyaev and Shestov*. Wernham, like most professional philosophers, can’t even imagine the logically impossible. He can, of course, imagine doing the technologically impossible. It was once impossible to travel to the moon or Mars, for example, but that is no longer impossible. Wernham argues that the logically impossible is not like this, it is not something that is just more difficult to do, it is an impossibility that can never be overcome. It cannot even be conceived; hence

he argues, if we show a position to involve a contradiction we have “refuted it and done so conclusively” (Wernham 1968: 109). But anyone who has seen the the Angel episode “I Will Remember You” (1008) has conceived the logically impossible and, in actual fact, imagined it in some detail. The Oracles, by swallowing the day that Angel is made human by the blood of the Mohra demon, make it that this day, which has happened, has never happened. Angel alone carries the memory of the day and thus has the ability to slay the Mohra demon when it (re)turns up (again?!).

[6] Like Buffy and her friends (a.k.a. the Scooby gang), Shestov seeks guidance through the interpretation of ancient texts and venerated sages. He notes for example, “that there lived in the middle ages a certain Peter Damian who declared that it is possible for God to make that which has already been not to be. And [he adds] I think that it is not a bad idea to throw this stick into the wheels of philosophy's swift-moving chariot” (Shestov, 1968b, 74-75). Shestov sees the story of the Fall recounted in Genesis as the loss of existential freedom through partaking of the fruits of the tree of knowledge ( i.e. reason). This, Shestov argues, cuts us off from a God for whom all things are possible, cuts us off from an omnipotent God who can do the logically impossible. Shestov, a Russian Jew, converted to Christianity because he understood that in Christian redemption a truly omnipotent God would not be bound by the law of non-contradiction and hence could make it that he, Shestov, who had sinned, had never sinned (this is much better than a less powerful God’s not holding your sins against you!). Indeed, such an etiolated form of forgiveness would never have tempted Shestov to convert to Christianity. Citing Martin Luther, once regarded by some sects of Christianity as the antichrist (Quinn 1996, 7), Shestov argues:

Luther was not afraid to force “the most unshakable of principles” the principle of contradiction, as well as the self-evident truth that flows from it (what has been cannot not have been), to retreat before the divine omnipotence. It is only thus that one can radically heal man’s fallen nature, it is only thus that one can destroy to the root the evil which entered the world along with sin and lead men back to the divine *valde bonum* (very good), to return to them that freedom which is not the freedom of choosing between good and evil with their

praises and condemnations but that freedom to create the good as He who made man in His own image creates it. (Shestov 1968a, 359)

The Genesis story of the Fall is essential for understanding Shestov, and hence, we would argue, the Buffyverse. But Shestov's interpretation is unique because, as he rightly argues, the more standard interpretations have all been done by and for those of us who have already accepted the fruits of reason. As noted above, Shestov argues that it was this original sin, accepting the fruits of reason, which permitted evil to enter the world and deprived us of a God for whom literally all things are possible. It also deprived us of true existential freedom. We are all constantly confronted with the existential choice between Athens (reason derived from the ancient Greek philosophers) and Jerusalem (the God of ancient Hebrew texts). "For the Greeks the fruits of the tree of knowledge were the source of philosophy for all time, and by this very fact brought men freedom. For the Bible, on the contrary, they were the beginning of enslavement and signified the fall of man" (Shestov 1968a, 325). In his major book, aptly titled, *Athens and Jerusalem*, Shestov confronts us with this primordial existential choice in the context of the story of the Fall

The Serpent, craftiest of the animals created by God, asks the woman, "Why has God forbidden you to eat of the fruit of all the trees of paradise?" And when the woman replies to him that God had forbidden them only to eat of the fruits of a single tree that they might not die, the serpent answers, "You shall not die, but God knows that the day you eat of these fruits your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." "Your eyes will be opened," says the serpent, "You shall die," says God. The metaphysics of knowledge in Genesis is strictly tied to the metaphysics of being. If God has spoken truly, knowledge leads to death; if the serpent has spoken truly, knowledge makes man like God. This was the question posed before the first man, and the one posed before us now. (Shestov 1968a, 280)

[7] Since most of us have followed the Greeks and accepted the fruits of reason we are no longer free, but are bound by its necessary laws. According to Shestov this also means, whether we realize it or not, that deep down in our souls we must

believe that “it was not the serpent but God who had deceived man” (Shestov 1968a, 256). Nor can we truly understand God’s advice to Adam: “As for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for on the day you eat thereof you shall surely die” (Shestov 1968a, 255). We refer to God’s words here as “advice” advisedly. They do not constitute a commandment. Nor are they a threat of any kind. Rejecting these mundane interpretations, Shestov argues that “God’s words do not mean that man will be punished for having disobeyed, but that knowledge hides in itself death” (Shestov 1968a, 279 ). Those of us who live solely by reason, those of us who seek knowledge, will find it impossible to accept that in God’s warning “A relationship is thus established between the fruits of the tree of knowledge and death” (Shestov 1968a, 279). Nor can we easily comprehend how accepting the laws of reason can somehow limit our freedom and bring evil into the world. Yet this is precisely what Shestov is arguing.

Adam before the fall, participated in the divine omnipotence. It was only after the fall that he fell under the power of knowledge and at the same moment lost the most precious of God’s gifts – freedom. For freedom does not consist in the possibility of choosing between good and evil, as we today are condemned to think. Freedom consists in the force and power not to admit evil into the world. God, the freest being, does not choose between good and evil. And the man whom He had created did not choose either, for there was nothing there to choose: evil did not exist in paradise. (Shestov 1968a, 256).

[8] Shestov credits Dostoevsky with the insight that reason and evil are inseparable. “The violence and frenzy of Dostoevsky’s speech when he talks of the self-evident truths sufficiently shows that he felt the deep, indissoluble bond that exists ... between knowledge and the evil that rules the world” (Shestov 1968a, 331).

[9] If there were no evil in paradise and if evil now rules the world, from whence did this evil come? Perhaps a more telling question might be where and how did this evil enter the world. In the parlance of the Buffyverse what was the first hellmouth and how was it opened? We have of course already answered this question. It was the tree of knowledge, and it was and still is opened by ravenously devouring the fruits of reason, allowing evil to enter the world, thus making saviors

of souls and slayers of vampires necessary to the present day. It is no coincidence that a hellmouth is located under Sunnydale high school, a knowledge dispensing institution. Joss Whedon, creator of the series, in discussing the first episode notes that “Sunnydale High School is based on every high school in America because so many kids believe their school is built on a hellmouth” (Interview *Buffy* Season 1 DVD). He also explains where the idea of the hellmouth came from, saying “We needed a reason why every monster in ( you know) in history would come to Sunnydale and so the hellmouth became sort of the central concept for us, because it allows us to get away with anything” (Interview *Buffy* Season 1 DVD). We note in passing that if you reject the law of non-contradiction anything is possible. In logic, from contradictory premisses any conclusion and its opposite may be derived. The main point here is that at the very root of knowledge lies the hellmouth. In season seven Andrew confesses that he was tempted to open the hellmouth, in the basement of the rebuilt high school, by the promise that he and his friends would be like gods. He imagines the three of them wearing togas dancing in a rather stage set version of Elysian fields singing “We are as gods! We are as gods!” (7016). This is certainly reminiscent of the serpent’s promise that “You will be like God.”

[10] At the end of seasons three and seven we see Buffy and her friends taking the extreme measures of blowing up the entire high school or destroying all of Sunnydale, in an effort to close the hellmouth and thus prevent evil from entering the world. But of course there already is evil in the world, and much of the Buffyverse is concerned with fighting evil demons and stopping them from opening the hellmouth, again and again

[11] Still, most of what comes out of the hellmouth is simply the personification of evil. But vampires are very much more than this (vampires being undead, their very existence is logically contradictory, which is not the case with demons, hell gods, and other monsters). That is why a slayer is needed to deal with them. What then is the secret of Buffy’s power over them? We have promised you a Shestovian key to that power. In order to get at this key it is necessary to answer briefly another obvious criticism of Shestov’s position.

[12] As we have seen, Shestov presents rational arguments for his position. But why should we accept his reasons if his conclusion is that we should choose

unreason over reason? There seems to be something contradictory about presenting rational arguments to reject reason, not that a contradiction would faze Shestov. Shestov's answer to this kind of criticism would be to point out that he is not completely rejecting reason; rather he is merely recommending that we not allow it, or anything else to dominate us:

To discard logic as an instrument, a means or aid for acquiring knowledge, would be extravagant. Why should we? .... But logic, as an aim in itself, or even as the *only* means to knowledge, is a different matter. Against this one must fight even if he has against him all the authorities of thought – beginning with Aristotle.(Shestov 1977, 55).

[13] Shestov would certainly agree with Dostoevsky that “two and two make four is an excellent thing.” But he would also concur that “to give everything its due, two and two make five is also a very fine thing”(Dostoevsky 1972, 23 ). Shestov cannot accept the so called eternal immutable truths of reason because to accept their necessity would be to admit that God too would be ruled and hence limited by the laws of logic. Shestov will not deny the omnipotence of God. “Immutability does not rule God, it serves Him, as do all the other truths which, insofar as they were created, possess only an executive power and only for so long as they are of some use” (Shestov 1968a, 345). In other words, Shestov does not deny or reject reason altogether. He uses it as a tool rather than falling victim to the necessity of its laws. Buffy, too, in her battle with evil uses reason when it suits her. In fact we would argue that her wooden stake is an instantiation of the law of non-contradiction. It is a tool which she uses most effectively to confront the logical impossibility of vampires, the undead. This explains why a wooden stick is “more effective than it sounds” (4011) and why vampires simply go poof when the point of their own logical absurdity is driven home. We are arguing that Buffy's secret weapon is the law of non-contradiction--that, like Shestov and unlike members of the Initiative, she knows that reason is only one tool among many and that it may not always be the best or most appropriate one. Why do vampires succumb only to a weapon made of wood? Some say that it invokes the wooden crucifix since vampires, as personifications of evil, also fear the sign of the cross. But we would argue, rather, that it recalls the tree of knowledge, which, as all trees, is not merely made of wood but is in actual fact wood itself, and in this case is also symbolic of



the law of non-contradiction. Thus, having the law of non-contradiction firmly in hand is the key to the Slayer's power.

[14] Even Dracula himself succumbs briefly to Buffy's penetrating logic (5001). The fact that he keeps coming back after being staked suggests or perhaps confirms that he is a much more sophisticated vampire than most. This is no mere gypsy trick; rather it suggests that he has chosen a very Shestovian approach to logic. Like Buffy he seems to be able to choose when to accept the dictates of reason, in particular, the law of non-contradiction. This should not really be surprising as Shestov is much more widely read in places like Dracula's Romanian homeland than he is in North America. In fact some of the work on Shestov one of us published in English was so well received over there, that it has since been translated into Romanian, and is easily available on the net (Rabb, 1983; [www.geocities.com/aga\\_10/religiesiratiune.htm](http://www.geocities.com/aga_10/religiesiratiune.htm)). Buffy's power and that of Dracula come from the same place, the ability to choose reason or unreason whenever it suits. Dracula knows this. When Buffy, before she realizes who he is, asks him "Do you understand what a slayer is?" he replies knowingly "Do You?" Later on he responds to her assertion that she comes from a long line of good guys by saying "But your power is rooted in darkness. You must feel it" (5001). Both Buffy and Dracula have the dark freedom of existential choice. This kind of choice is truly existential, is disturbingly authentic, because reason cannot tell you how to choose or even when to choose. You, and only you, are fully responsible for every choice you make. Further, as almost every episode in the series confirms, the wrong choice could have disastrous consequences, usually the end of the world, the final apocalypse. Buffy is constantly having to choose to be the chosen one. This is an authentic existential choice. No one, not even Giles her watcher, can make it for her. As Buffy herself says "There's no mystical guidebook, no all-knowing council -- human rules don't apply and Father doesn't know best. There's only me. I am the Law" (7005).

[15] The popularity of the series itself is found in the way it not only embodies existential choice, but also privileges ancient texts over the more sterile aspects of the high school curriculum at Sunnydale. The high school itself, being built on the hellmouth, is in effect the tree of knowledge transplanted. Its motto engraved in Latin above the front door is translated as "Enter all ye who seek knowledge"(2017). The language is an ironic echo of Dante's description of Hell

“Abandon all hope ye who enter here” (*Inferno*, 3.9). Angelus obviously takes the school motto as an invitation to enter “Hell” giggling the words “What can I say? I’m a knowledge seeker” as he enters and kills Jenny Calendar (2017). Throughout the first three seasons, the “high school seasons,” the knowledge contained in the formal curriculum is seen by the students as largely irrelevant. The Scooby Gang retreats to Giles’ library to consult his ancient tomes when it comes to important things like fighting evil. Even when Willow, for example uses her computer skills to aid in the battle against evil, the use of this kind of knowledge and technology is always subordinated to the guiding wisdom of ancient authors and texts. The Scooby gang never use the logos as “an aim in itself, or ... the only means to knowledge” (Shestov ). Today’s teens relate, also finding high school alienating and irrelevant because it doesn’t tell you who you are, doesn’t answer the questions teenagers need to ask. The Buffy mythos fills this spiritual and intellectual void felt by many teens, and adults too: As Joss Whedon points out, the damage done by high school is often irreparable. Indeed a central myth of the Buffyverse is that high school is horrific. Whedon, referring to the popularity of the series among adults notes that: “People out of high school respond because people never get over high school” (Interview *Buffy* Season 1 DVD).

[16] The Buffyverse is a reminder that high schools merely perpetuate the limiting logos introduced into the world by acceptance of the tree of knowledge and hence continue the thralldom of original sin. The Buffyverse encourages viewers to ask questions about the problem of evil in the world which they may find too difficult or painful to deal with in more direct ways. It raises questions about whether the magico-mythico religious or the logo-ratio secular is better equipped to deal with evil. Do we fight the axis of evil by sending troops equipped with the latest in military technology or by reading and understanding the ancient sacred texts of our enemies? As the episodes about The Initiative clearly show, the logo-ratio technology used by the military leaves much to be desired. Again the problem is relying exclusively on the logos, ignoring completely the magico-mythico. Indeed, at the very root of the Initiative is evil in the persona of Adam the robo-demon they build ostensibly to fight evil, but who turns out instead to be evil incarnate, a perfect combination of the evils of technology and demonhood which seem naturally to work well together. It takes magical cooperation of the whole Scooby gang to defeat it.

[17] The Buffyverse provides teens raised in secular homes with a much needed mythos, which includes the Biblical story of the genesis of evil through partaking of the tree of knowledge. It encourages us to smell the rat in the logo-ratio secular. Youth raised in more fundamentalist religious households also find the Buffyverse strangely compelling, for it allows them to rebel against the narratives their parents find sacred without rejecting the values and mythos found in those texts. They can, in other words, both rebel and not rebel at one and the same time.

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