

# GUSTAV SHPET: LITERATURE AND AESTHETICS FROM THE SILVER AGE TO THE 1930s

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*The paper reviews Gustav Shpet's immersion in Russian Symbolism, his contacts with the Imagists, his contribution to the work of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the study of literature at GAKhN. In the final section an analysis of Shpet's career as a translator is offered.*

***Književnost in estetika od »srebrnega veka« do 30. let 20. stoletja.*** Prispevek preučuje povezanost Gustava Špeta z ruskim simbolizmom, njegove stike z imagisti, njegov prispevek k delu Moskovskega lingvističnega krožka in študij književnosti na GAKhN-ju. V zadnjem delu ponudi analizo Špetove prevajalske kariere.

## Amongst the Symbolists

Shpet's literary and theatre affiliations had commenced in earnest after his move to Moscow in 1907. In Kiev, where he studied at the St. Vladimir University, he had given expression to his early literary ambitions by publishing brief newspaper notes under the pseudonym 'Lord Genry' (M. Polivanov, "Ocherk" 15). There he also was Anna Akhmatova's psychology teacher (later in life Shpet was one of Boris Pasternak's philosophy professors; on Shpet's contacts with Akhmatova, Pasternak, Mikhail Kuzmin and Sofia Parnok see Tihanov, "Multifariousness"). Yet it was Moscow, and Russian Symbolism, that became the ground of his first serious association with a major literary and artistic circle, "Obshchestvo svobodnoi estetiki" ('The Society of Free Aesthetics'), also known simply as "Estetika" ('Aesthetics'). "Estetika" was founded under the informal leadership of Valerii Briusov; other distinguished participants included Andrei Belyi, Mikhail Gershenzon, and the artist Valentin Serov, the literary scholars Sakulin and Dzhivelegov, and the philosophers Fedor Stepun and Boris Vysheslavtsev, to name but a few. Shpet befriended several fellow-participants, notably Iurgis Baltrushaitis, who was to become a life-long friend, and the brothers Emilii and Nikolai Metner (Belyi, *Mezhd*u 242); more

likely than not, his acquaintance with Pavel Sakulin also goes back to this time. A couple of years later Shpet joined the group around the Musaget publishing house, dominated by Emilii Metner, Belyi, and Lev Kobylinskii (Ellis), the latter also a friend of Shpet's (cf. Belyi, *Nachalo* 53). Although Belyi perceived Shpet as a late-comer, he evidently had considerable respect for Shpet's taste and valued his background in philosophy (Belyi, *Nachalo* 75). Shpet asserted the "philosophical nature" [filosofichnost'] of Belyi's 1904 collection of poetry "Gold in Azure" [Zoloto v lazuri] (Belyi, *Mezhdu* 306), but would sarcastically warn him on numerous occasions against playing with, or "parading", philosophy in his poems; in Belyi's words – reporting Shpet's – in order to be a truly philosophical poet, one doesn't need to wear "a shabby tail-coat borrowed from [Heinrich] Rickert's wardrobe" (Belyi, *Mezhdu* 307), nor indeed to mix the mystic aspects of a poem with the philosophical ones (Belyi, *Vospominaniia* 561; Belyi, "Iz vospominanii" 338). Belyi confessed to being "in love" with Shpet's "subtle and sophisticated mind" (Belyi, *Vospominaniia* 559–60). In September 1909, when it was still unclear whether "Musaget" will be launched as a journal or as a full-fledged publishing house (cf. Belyi, *Mezhdu* 374), Belyi regarded Shpet as a potential contributor to the journal who could write on Fichte and on Polish philosophy and culture (Shpet, himself of Polish descent, would read Belyi the poetry of Słowacki and Mickiewicz in Polish; cf. Belyi, *Vospominaniia* 560). Emilii Metner, too, believed at the time that Shpet would make a good contributor to the philosophical section of the journal (cf. Shchedrina, "Ia pishu" 78 n.18). Yet a year later, in October 1910, Shpet's outspokenness led Belyi to write to Metner that Shpet was "brilliant, but apparently hostile to us" (quoted in Shchedrina, "Ia pishu" 56). Despite this early crisis, Shpet and Belyi worked together once again after the Revolution, in the Moscow branch of the Free Philosophical Association (Vol'fila), established in September 1921. Belyi became the chairman of the branch's council; Shpet was elected one of his deputies (Gut 94; Lavrov and Malmstad 269 n. 22). A few years later, in 1927, Belyi wrote to Ivanov-Razumnik that his gradual estrangement from Shpet had to do with the latter's attraction to alcohol, which Belyi did not wish to share (Lavrov and Malmstad 463). Belyi briefly resumed the acquaintance in 1933, about a year before his death (cf. his two letters to Shpet of April and August 1933 in *Nachala* 1(1992): 64–5).

Shpet was not the only philosopher to participate in the activities around the "Musaget" publishing house; Vladimir Ern, Sergei Bulgakov, Sergei Gessen, Nikolai Berdiaev and Mikhail Gershenzon were also frequently seen there. From 1910 to 1914 "Musaget" published the Russian version of *Logos*, the international journal of philosophy, edited by Fedor Stepun and Sergei Gessen. Within the membership of "Musaget", there was a clear divide between those who were in favour of the line represented by *Logos* and those who opposed it as being too neo-Kantian and not heeding in sufficient measure other currents in contemporary philosophy. Shpet, Ern and Bulgakov (the latter occasionally ridiculed by Shpet as using a "pomade prepared from religious superstition [iz popovskogo dukha] and memories

of a peculiar Marxism”; cf. Belyi, *Mezhd* 306) were in the camp of the opponents; in Shpet’s case this was no doubt motivated by a rejection of neo-Kantianism in favour of phenomenology.

Amongst the Symbolists, Shpet became more intimately acquainted not only with Belyi, Baltrushaitis, Ellis (and Nikolai Feofilaktov, the principal illustrator of *Vesy*), but also with Viacheslav Ivanov. Their contacts are yet to be studied in detail, but it would appear from the scattered evidence available that over time the relationship grew from Shpet’s respect for and interest in Ivanov the poet and thinker into a friendship in which Ivanov recognised Shpet’s seriousness as a philosopher and commentator on literature. Lev Shestov mentions an evening at his home on 8 December 1914, where he and his guests – Ivanov, Shpet and Berdiaev – spent the time in captivating discussions (Baranova-Shestova 130); Shpet’s letters to his second wife Nataliia Guchkova-Shpet reveal (cf. Shchedrina, *Gustav Shpet* 225; 248; 258) that in the summer of 1915 he and Lev Shestov would often visit Ivanov to hear him read from his poetry, sometimes in the company of Bal’mont, Baltrushaitis and Remizov (Shpet later received a brief mention in Remizov’s *Vzvikhrennaia Rus’*; cf. Remizov 232), at others in Mikhail Gershenzon’s. Shpet described Ivanov’s poems read on one such occasion (7 June 1915) as “superb” [prevoskhodnyi]. Ivanov was apparently an authority in Shpet’s eyes not just as a poet, but also as a mentor inculcating in Shpet a relentless work discipline (cf. Serebrennikov 228). Shpet presented Ivanov with three of his publications (cf. Obatin 323–4), all with personal inscriptions: *Iavlenie i smysl* (1914); *Filosofskoe nasledstvo P. D. Turkevicha* (1915) and *Istoriia, kak problema logiki* (1916). In 1920, Boris Gornung participated in long discussions on the future of Russian culture, in which Ivanov would side with Lunacharsky on all issues, while Gornung was enjoying support from Shpet (B. Gornung, *Pokhod* 331 n.26). Later, during Ivanov’s first years in Italy, Shpet was apparently instrumental in GAKhN electing Ivanov as one of its ‘member-candidates’ in December 1926 (Bird 320; Kondiurina 238 n. 3). Shpet endeavoured to assist Ivanov by offering to buy on behalf of GAKhN his Moscow library (Kondiurina 373), while Ivanov wanted to entrust Shpet with overseeing the final stage of publication, including the proof-reading, of his translation of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy (Kondiurina 235, 239, 240 n. 5) which was supposed to be published by GAKhN. The task was deemed by Ivanov to demand so much knowledge and organisational talent as to be impossible to assign to anyone but Shpet. The publication, however, did not materialise (cf. Bird 331 n.110).

Behind these personal ties to some of the major poets of Russian Symbolism, we have to see (and here only briefly refer to) the larger picture: Symbolism left its crucial imprint on Shpet’s subsequent aesthetic theory, contributing to the formation of his overall conservative platform (cf. Nikolaev 265–7). Shpet’s appreciation of “seriousness” and his fight against “emptiness, utilitarian attitudes [utilitarnosti], barbarism” found support in the philosophical ambition and gravitas of Symbolism, whose praise Shpet continued to sing into the 1920s in his *Aesthetic*

*Fragments* (Shpet, “Esteticheskie” 357–9), while at the same time rejecting Naturalism and Futurism and criticising Akhmatova’s acmeist poetry (Shpet, “Esteticheskie” 371).

## Shpet and the Imagists

If it is fair to aver that Gustav Shpet’s affiliations with Russian Symbolism had not been researched in sufficient detail, the same is true to an even larger extent of his contacts with the Russian Imagists. Shpet’s sympathy for the Imagists, an avant-garde group active from 1919 to 1927 and including Vadim Shershenevich, Sergei Esenin and Anatolii Mariengof, among others, would come as a surprise when one recalls his (already mentioned) unambiguous and sharp criticism of Futurism, the most significant manifestation of the Russian literary avant-garde, in the first instalment of the *Aesthetic Fragments* (Shpet, “Esteticheskie” 361–3).

Shpet’s contacts with the Imagists occurred at a time when, on the demise of Symbolism and the fading of Acmeism after the outbreak of the Revolution and the Civil War, it was imperative for the intelligentsia to re-position itself vis-à-vis the new political realities and the new aesthetic trends. Esenin was apparently the first of the future Imagists to make Shpet’s acquaintance. Andrei Belyi saw behind this friendship a shared proclivity to alcohol-induced merriment (Belyi, *Mezhdru* 310), but there was undoubtedly more to it than that. Shpet was among several members of the Moscow Union of Writers (others included Mikhail Gershenzon, Mikhail Osorgin and Georgii Chulkov) who in December 1918 considered a request from Esenin for a document certifying his possession of live stock to be issued, thus enabling the poet to protect himself against tax and requisition (Esenin 7(2): 202 and 284). The contacts between the two probably intensified in 1919 when Esenin joined the short-lived literary association “Dvoret Iskusstv”, of which Shpet, along with Sakulin, Vengerov, Tsvetaeva and others, was also a member (Savchenko 204). More importantly, beyond the drinking companionship and the day-to-day business, Shpet was clearly interested in Esenin’s poetry. The peak of this interest and of their literary contacts seems to fall in the years 1920–1921, when Esenin presented Shpet with inscribed copies (Esenin 7(3): 60 and 7(1): 158) of his books *Confessions of a Hooligan* [Ispoved’ khuligana], 1921) and *Pugachov* [the latter inscription, “Milomu Gustavu/ Gustavovichu/ S liubov’iu liutoi” is dated December 1921, while the publication date indicated in the book is 1922]. A copy of the collective publication *Imazhinisty* was inscribed by Esenin, Mariengof and Riurik Ivnev (Esenin 7(1): 117 and 447) to Shpet’s daughter Lenora (1905–1976) in December 1920 (the publication date indicated in the book is 1921). As Mariengof reports in his memoir *A Novel without Lies* [Roman bez vran’ia’], in the summer of 1921 he and Esenin organised a gathering at which they read from their new works (Esenin read from “Pugachov” on this occasion); Shpet, Meyerhold, the artist Georgii Iakulov, and the sculptor Sergei Konenkov were present (Mariengof 130; Iur’ev and Shumikhin 383).

Shpet must have lent a sympathetic ear to Esenin's and Mariengof's works, for in the first half of September 1921 the Imagists, insulted by an article in which Lunacharsky referred to them as "charlatans who wish to fool [morochit'] the public" (Lunacharskii, "Svoboda" 6), published a challenging response in the journal *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*, calling Lunacharskii to a "public discussion on Imagism, where Prof. Shpet, Prof. Sakulin and other representatives of science and the arts will be invited in the capacity of competent judges" (Esenin, Mariengof, Shershenevich: 249). The letter, a different version of which was also sent to the journal *Kniga i revoliutsiia* (but did not appear there), was signed by Esenin, Mariengof and Shershenevich. The original – now considered lost – was handwritten by Mariengof, yet the actual instigator of the letter, according to Matvei Roizman (1896–1973), himself a minor Imagist poet, was Shershenevich, as he was allegedly the only one personally familiar with both Sakulin and Shpet, paying them occasional visits at their homes (Roizman 145).

The accuracy of Roizman's memoirs ought to be questioned here on two counts. Shershenevich may well have played a part in suggesting Sakulin for the role of a "competent judge," but more likely than not his name was put forward as a result of a collective discussion rather than by Shershenevich alone. As for Shpet's name, it is more likely that not Shershenevich but Esenin and Mariengof were the actual force behind his 'nomination'.

Two arguments seem to be corroborating these conjectures. While Shershenevich was clearly grateful to Sakulin for giving his adolescent literary ambitions an early (and decisive) impetus (which Shershenevich duly recorded in his own memoirs: Iur'ev and Shumikhin 428; 460), Esenin, too, felt he was indebted to Sakulin, as the latter had been similarly supportive of his own beginnings as a poet (Kuniaevy 58: Unfortunately, Kuniaevy reproduce uncritically Roizman's statement that Shershenevich was the sole initiator of the letter to *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*). Thus it is extremely unlikely that Esenin – the fact of whose personal acquaintance with and debt to Sakulin Roizman completely neglects – will not have had a say in the conversations on Sakulin's role in the proposed public dispute with Lunacharsky.

On the other hand, Shershenevich cannot be taken to have been unconditionally fascinated with Shpet. Back in December 1918, he had put Shpet's name on a list of twenty Russian literati whom Shershenevich, on behalf of the Professional Union of Poets [Professional'nyi soiuz poetov], wanted to see elected on the council [sovet] of the Literary Department of the Narkompros (Drozdov 148–9). His motion, however, was rejected. A year later, in 1919, Shershenevich opened his poem "A lyrical construction" ["Liricheskaia konstruktsiia"] with the impenetrably (to most readers today) ironic line "All who in Chelpanov's cradle their thought have nursed!" ["Vse, kto v liul'ke Chelpanova mysl' svoiu/vynianchil!": Shershenevich 204]. Georgii Chelpanov (1862–1936) was widely known as Shpet's mentor at Kiev University and his "patron" in Moscow (cf. Belyi, *Mezhdru* 306); Shpet was considered Chelpanov's most gifted pupil who eventually overtook his teacher in terms of prestige and recognition (Belyi, *Mezhdru*

307). (Chelpanov is mentioned once again, again in a rather ambiguous context, in Shershenevich's 1920 manifesto "2 x 2 = 5" (Shershenevich 407).) Shershenevich's opening line from "A lyrical construction" was thus not just collectively addressed to Chelpanov's pupils, but may well have envisaged Shpet in particular. This makes it more likely for Esenin and Mariengof, rather than Shershenevich himself, to have put forward Shpet's name as a "judge" in the discussion with Lunacharsky, which in the end never took place (Lunacharsky declined the offer in a response published in the same issue of *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*). If Shershenevich wasn't over-enthusiastic about Shpet, by the mid-1930s the latter's disappointment over Shershenevich's career as a poet was equally unconcealed; in a letter of 21 November 1936 to his son Sergei, Shpet remarked: "and Shershenevich, alas, has failed" ("A iz Shershenevicha, uvy, nichego ne vyshlo", quoted in Serebrennikov 177).

Shpet's contacts with the Imagists appear to have been relatively short-lived. He does not seem to have kept up his friendship with Esenin, nor did he deepen his acquaintance with Mariengof (although as late as 1926 he promised Boris Gornung to establish a contact between him and Mariengof; cf. B. Gornung, *Pokhod* 397). Shpet's links with the Imagists did not have any noteworthy effect on his aesthetic views or on his immediate political fortunes. The mention of his name in the Imagists' letter did not put off Lunacharsky, who knew Shpet from his time in Kiev, from helping the philosopher in 1922 to stay on in Russia after his name had been placed on the infamous list of intellectuals to be exiled from the country. It was only in 1929, after the process of Stalinisation had advanced to the point where a reversal was no longer feasible, that Lunacharsky joined the chorus of ideology-driven criticism of Shpet's work, castigating his writings at a meeting at the "Land and Factory" [*Zemlia i fabrika*] publishing house in October 1929 as "most harmful" ("vredneishie sochineniia Shpeta", Lunacharskii, "Nashi" 436). Lunacharsky's speech appeared on 28 October 1929 in *Literaturnaia gazeta*; the next day, Shpet was released from his duties as Vice-President of GAKhN – an unambiguous example of media deployment as an instrument of cadre politics under Stalin.

## **Shpet and the Study of Literature in the Moscow Linguistic Circle and GAKhN**

The Moscow Linguistic Circle (MLC) existed formally from March 1915 to November 1924. It is not known exactly when Shpet became a member of the Circle, but it is clear that by March 1920 he was actively involved in its work. In an article on the history of the MLC written in November 1976 for *The Short Literary Encyclopaedia* [*Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*], but only published twenty years later, Roman Jakobson noted that Shpet's phenomenology of language left "an evident mark on the evolution of the Circle in the concluding phase of its life" (Jakobson, "Moskovskii" 367); elsewhere, he praised Shpet's important role as an "outstanding philoso-

pher of Husserl's school" (Jakobson, "An Example" 534), whom Husserl himself considered "one of his most remarkable students" (Jakobson, "Retrospect" 713). (Jakobson also recalled that Shpet had urged him to acquaint himself with the ideas of Anton Marty.) After Jakobson's departure for Estonia and then Prague in 1920, Shpet's (and later, through him, GAKhN's) influence gradually became so overpowering that it eventually led to the split of the Circle in mid-1922 (Nikolaev 228). In the final stages of the Circle's existence, several younger members – Boris Gornung, Buslaev, Zhinkin – joined GAKhN, where Shpet was elected, as we have seen, Vice-President in 1924; the library of the Circle was also transferred to GAKhN (Toman 66).

Shpet's impact on the work of the MLC flowed above all from the publication of his *Aesthetic Fragments*, the three instalments of which proved of immense importance to a group of younger scholars and literati at the Moscow Linguistic Circle and later at GAKhN. But his contributions to the work of the Circle were noted earlier than that. On 14 March 1920 Shpet gave a paper on the "Aesthetic elements in the structure of the word" ('Esteticheskie momenty v strukture slova', cf. Shapir 273), and on 4 April 1920 he participated in a most interesting discussion on plot ('siuzhet'), where Shpet and Petr Bogatyrev sided with Vinokur's insistence on the essentially verbal ('slovesnaia') nature of plot, against Osip Brik's suggestion that in painting and sculpture plots are possible that are of a non-verbal character (Shapir 299–300). This discussion bears an early testimony to Shpet's belief in language as the provider of a universal semiotic code that enables the processes of translation and expression between different sign systems (literature, painting, sculpture etc.). (Shpet advances this idea most comprehensively in his article "Literatura" which was written as an entry for GAKhN's *Dictionary of Artistic Terms* [Slovar' khudozhestvennykh terminov]; the article was first published in 1982.) Finally, at a meeting of the Circle on 21 March 1922, it was proposed that Shpet be invited to become a member of the editorial board of the linguistic section of the Circle's publishing house (in his capacity as a philosopher) – an idea which did not gain universal approval amongst the membership (the planned publishing house did not materialise in the end; cf. Toddes and Chudakova 240–41).

It is with the appearance of the *Aesthetic Fragments* (written in January–February 1922, published in 1922–23) that Shpet's influence on the Moscow Linguistic Circle became most visible. Of particular significance is the second instalment of the *Aesthetic Fragments*, where Shpet offered the first ever definition of poetics as grammar: "poetics in the broad sense is the grammar of poetic language and poetic thought" (Shpet, "Esteticheskie," 408; my translation, emphasis in the original). This initially metaphorical use of "grammar" was later taken up by Roman Jakobson in the late 1950s and the early 1960s in his well-known programme for the study of the "Poetry of grammar and grammar of poetry", where "grammar" evolved from a metaphor to a term with distinct scope and content. At the same place Shpet also speaks for the first time of the "poetic" (rather than simply aesthetic) "function of the word", thus foreshadowing Jakobson's later au-

thoritative emphasis on the poetic function of language.

The second vital contribution of Shpet in the *Aesthetic Fragments* is his definition of the structure of the word and its differentiation from the concept of system. Again in the second instalment, Shpet writes:

What is meant by ‘structure’ of the word is not the morphological, syntactic, or stylistic construction – in short, not the arrangements of linguistic units ‘in the plane’ [ploskostnoe], but on the contrary – the organic, depth-wise arrangement of the word, from the sensually conceivable [wording] to the formal-ideal (eidetic) object, at all levels of the relations located [raspolagaiushchikhsia] between these two terms. The structure is a concrete construction whose individual parts can vary in ‘size’ [v “razmere”] and even in quality, but not a single part of the whole *in potentia* can be removed without destroying this whole” (Shpet, “Esteticheskie” 382; my translation).

The system, on the other hand, is a set of structures where each structure preserves its own particularity. The biological organism – Shpet’s example – is precisely such “a system of structures,” where each structure (bones, nerves, blood vessels etc.) remains concrete and distinct. This differentiation between structure and system was welcomed by some linguists in the 1920s, notably Viktor Vinogradov (cf. Vinogradov 265) who read into Shpet’s argument a privileging of the notion of structure (depth) over that of system (horizontality), and thus – one can add – an implicit criticism of Saussure’s influential preference for synchronicity (Shpet was aware of Saussure’s *Cours* since about the end of June 1922 when he received the unpublished translation of the first part prepared by Aleksandr Romm, another member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle; cf. Toddes and Chudakova 235).

Finally, Shpet’s *Aesthetic Fragments* should be credited with anticipating the trend of detecting in scientific discourse traces of figurativeness, a feature which brings the discourses of science and literature closer to one another than customarily thought. “Figurativeness [obraznost’] is not only a trait of ‘poetry’... it is a general property of language, which belongs to scientific discourse as well” (Shpet, “Esteticheskie” 443). This statement questioned Husser’s certainty that the discourse of science can be strictly differentiated from everyday discourse and offered an approach that – although not pursued further by Shpet himself – was revived by Derrida and Hayden White in the 1970s and the 1980s.

But we can also see from this statement why Shpet was perceived as an outright enemy by the Petersburg Formalists (especially Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum) and as insufficiently radical by Jakobson. Despite the pioneering distinction between the poetic and aesthetic function of language, Shpet remained interested mainly in the latter. He denied poetry – and literature in general – their special status as sole exponents of discursive metaphoricity bestowed upon them by the Formalists. And although he resolutely opposed the psychological interpretation of the image (as practised by Potebnia), both in the *Aesthetic Fragments* and in the *Introduction to Ethnic Psychology* (because of that the latter work earned him Jakobson’s



conditional praise; cf. Jakobson's letter to Shpet in Shchedrina, ed. 505–506), Shpet nonetheless sought to explain the image as hovering between the object and the idea; he endeavoured to clarify its relations to the inner form of the word, to its logical and ontological dimensions. Last but not least, he was also receptive to the subjective-biographical aspects of the literary work of art, singling out the importance of the authorial voice (Shpet, "Esteticheskie" 464–71).

Ultimately – and here lies the crucial difference between Shpet and the Formalists – literature for him was not a self-sufficient system to be explained away with reference to the specifically poetic function of language; literature for Shpet – even when all his semiotic inclinations are taken into account – is primarily just one of the spheres of creativity appropriated by what he calls the "aesthetic consciousness." As a phenomenologist, Shpet's prime concern was to understand under what conditions an utterance becomes the object of aesthetic experience. This question is inextricably linked to the question of sense, so consistently ignored by the Formalists: "how should one express a given sense [smysl], so that its perception is an *aesthetic* one?" (Shpet, "Esteticheskie" 448; my translation, emphasis in the original). Equally, it presupposes attention to form in its necessary relation to *content*, as both the Aesthetic Fragments and Shpet's article "Literatura" demonstrate.

Small wonder then that the Formalists were hostile to Shpet's *Aesthetic Fragments* and the output of his younger followers in the MLC and at GAKhN. Eikhenbaum wrote on 30 June 1924 to Grigorii Vinokur – who was very sympathetic to Shpet's ideas, reviewed favourably his *Aesthetic Fragments*, openly acknowledged his influence on his own work (cf. Vinokur 106), and even tried (unsuccessfully) to urge Jakobson and Eikhenbaum to shed their reservations towards the philosopher – that in the end he "doesn't believe" in Shpet, "it's all empty rhetoric" [eto pustoe krasnorechie] (quoted in Chudakova and Toddes 17). Shklovsky, too, preserved a highly sceptical and ironic attitude, as is clear from his reaction to Shpet's work as a translator of verse as late as late as 1934 (see further below in this article).

The value of the *Aesthetic Fragments* is thus twofold. Firstly, despite the fact that on several counts Shpet in fact presaged important developments in structuralism and semiotics, his book presented the philosophically most sophisticated (and earliest) substantive, if at times oblique, polemic with Formalism, preceding both Engel'gardt's and Medvedev's later critiques. Secondly, and even more importantly, it offered a positive programme for the study of the verbal work of art from the positions of phenomenological aesthetics (Shpet's occasional departures from Husserl notwithstanding), cross-bred with hermeneutics. Here the concept of "inner form" is of particular significance. Formulated as early as 1917 in his essay "Mudrost' ili razum?" ("Wisdom or Reason?"), Shpet's crucial concept of "inner form" harked back to Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language and culture. It was sharpened in Shpet's work on the history and the current state of hermeneutics (in "The Hermeneutics and Its Problems", completed

in 1918) and then occupied centre stage in both the *Aesthetic Fragments* and the *Introduction to Ethnic Psychology*, not to mention Shpet's 1927 monograph specifically dedicated to the inner form of the word. "Inner form" was also an important theoretical instrument in the research of Shpet's younger colleagues at GAKhN. In 1923, Shpet gave at GAKhN a paper on "The concept of inner form in Wilhelm Humboldt," followed in 1924 by papers from Buslaev ("The concept of inner form in Steinthal and Potebnia") and Kenigsberg ("The concept of inner form in Anton Marty"). This direction was followed up in the collective GAKhN volume *Artistic Form* [Khudozhestvennaia forma] of 1927, where Shpet's disciples offered an exploration of form from the perspectives of aesthetics and semantics. Equidistant from both Marxism and Formalism, this volume was ultimate proof of this younger generation of scholars having little time or regard for either, a position that no doubt put them, their teacher, and their institution, the State Academy for Artistic Sciences, in a very difficult position.

## Shpet's Literary Translations

Shpet's contribution to Russian culture should be measured not just by the scope and the quality of his original work. He was an indefatigable promoter of Western philosophy, whose translations span an impressive range of authors from Berkeley to Hegel and Rickert (Shpet's translation of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* was published in 1937 without a mention of Shpet's name, cf. Serebrennikov 1995: 144 n.5). His single most important translation of a philosophical text, that of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is a major accomplishment and the result of selfless work and perseverance during the last two years of his life (the translation did not appear until 1959). Here, however, I focus on Shpet's contributions as a translator of verse and prose, an aspect of his career that has so far failed to attract serious scholarly attention. The added value of such research is twofold: a) it helps to reveal Shpet's extensive network of contacts with a number of both significant and lesser-known twentieth-century Russian poets active as translators, as well as the part he played in a string of journals and almanacs in the 1920s ; b) even more importantly, Shpet's work as a translator after his expulsion from GAKhN assists us in grasping the practice of literary translation as an instrument of ideological power and a site of competing political tenets in the 1930s.

Shpet's first known translations of verse are a distich by Plato and a fragment from Alcaeus (Levinton and Ustinov, "Ukazatel" 194; the two texts are reproduced in L. Gornung, "Moi" 178–9), published in the third issue (September 1923) of the obscure typewritten literary journal *Hermes* [(Germes); these translations are absent in the bibliography of Shpet's translations compiled by Mitiushin (cf. Mitiushin, "Bibliografiia" 91–2; Shpet's translation of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues* is also omitted there)]. The journal was launched in the summer of 1922 by a group of young men, most of them aspiring poets and philologists. The person behind the

first two issues was Boris Gornung (1899–1976), a member – as we have seen – of the Moscow Linguistic Circle in its later years. He formed an editorial board which included, among others, his brother Lev Gornung (1902–1993), the promising philologist Maksim Kenigsberg (1900–1924) – to whose memory Shpet’s *Vnutrenniaia forma slova* is dedicated – and Kenigsberg’s friend (later his wife) Nina Vol’kenau. The last two issues (out of four) saw a change in the editorial board which was now chaired by Kenigsberg and was joined by Aleksei Buslaev (Chairman of the MLC at the time the first issue of *Hermes* was published) and Viktor Mozalevskii. Kenigsberg’s untimely death in 1924 meant that only the first part of the fourth issue was prepared, already without Boris Gornung’s participation as a member of the editorial board (cf. B. Gornung, “O zhurnale” 188). More importantly, at the beginning of 1924 a “scholarly-artistic” [nauchno-khudozhestvennyi] advisory board was formed, chaired by Shpet and including some of his GAKhN colleagues, notably Aleksandr Gabrichesvkii, Mikhail Petrovskii and the classicist Aleksandr Chelpanov (the eminent psychologist’s son). Shpet and his colleagues had great plans for the second part of the fourth issue which was supposed to carry a number of scholarly articles; instead, these were all published some three years later, long after the journal had ceased to exist: Shpet’s article on Humboldt evolved into a book (*Vnutrenniaia forma slova*, 1927), whereas the articles to be written by Petrovskii, Zhinkin, Guber, and Volkov appeared in 1927 in GAKhN’s afore-mentioned collective volume *Khudozhestvennaia forma* (cf. B. Gornung, “O zhurnale” 188).

Shpet’s close involvement with these young literati continued over the next few years, until around 1926–27 (cf. B. Gornung, *Pokhod* 331 n.25). Joined by Nikolai Berner and Aleksandr Romm (on Berner, see Ustinov 5–64; on Romm, see K. Polivanov, “Mashinopisnye” 47 n.12), Boris Gornung conceived the typewritten literary almanac *Mnemosyne* (“Mnemoszina”, 1924); he confirmed in a letter to Mikhail Kuzmin of September 1924 that Shpet had been the driving force behind the formation of the new group that launched *Mnemosyne* (Levinton and Ustinov, “K istorii” 209). Another almanac, *Hyperborean* [Giperborei], which saw the light of day in Moscow towards the end of 1926 (Vorob’eva 177), was the result of collaboration, under Shpet’s guidance, between the Gornung brothers and several GAKhN scholars, including Nikolai Volkov and Boris Griftsov. A second issue of *Hyperborean* was in preparation in 1927 but was banned by the GPU (Vorob’eva 178). Shpet’s already mentioned translation of Plato’s distich was re-published in the *Mnemosyne*, while *Hyperborean* brought out his article “Literatura” (K. Polivanov, “Mashinopisnye” 46), the 1929 manuscript version of which was eventually published in Tartu in 1982. Since *Hermes* and *Hyperborean* were produced in just 12 copies each (B. Gornung, “O zhurnale” 186; Vorob’eva 179 – unlike his brother, Lev Gornung asserts that *Hermes* was produced in three copies only cf. L. Gornung, “Moi” 175), the likely impact of Shpet’s contributions there was probably rather limited (although Boris Gornung did insist that these periodicals were read by hundreds of people in Moscow, Petersburg, Kiev, Kazan, and Nizhni

Novgorod; cf. B. Gornung, *Pokhod* 349). Amongst the better-known poets, only Kuzmin and Sofiia Parnok published in *Mnemosyne*.

In the 1920s Shpet was still translating sporadically, and mostly for pleasure; not so in the 1930s when after his removal from GAKhN translation became his principal way of earning a living. The remaining years of Shpet's live (1930–37) were spent translating into Russian a vast amount of literature, mainly from the nineteenth-century English canon. No doubt Shpet was handsomely equipped for a career as a professional translator. He stated in a declaration to the Prosecution, written in 1937, that he had command of 13 foreign languages: English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Latin, and Greek (Serebrennikov 190); the number of languages he could translate from was even larger – seventeen (Shpet, “Pis'mo” 587) – and was magnified to nineteen in petitions to Stalin written on different occasions by Shpet's wife and the actor Vasilii Kachalov (Serebrennikov 284; 287). Shpet himself indicated that he undertook editorial work on translations from the canon of the English, Polish, German, and the Scandinavian literatures (Shpet, “Pis'mo” 589). He also acted as evaluator of translations for various publishers, most frequently for “Academia”.

More often than not Shpet translated prose, Dickens being at the centre of his work after 1930. Both *Hard Times* and *Bleak House* (the latter abridged for children and adolescents) appeared in 1933 in Shpet's translation. His translation of Dickens' *Pickwick Club Papers* was, however, rejected (M. Polivanov, “Ocherk” 30), and Shpet had to resign himself to being allowed to compile a volume of commentaries published in 1934. Vladimir Milashevskii, the artist who illustrated the *Pickwick Papers*, noted in one version of his memoirs that both Shpet and Evgenii Lann (who translated the book together with A. V. Krivtsova) were hostile towards his illustrations, insisting instead that the edition carry the original illustrations by Robert Seymour, Robert Buss, and Hablot Browne (Phiz). In the end, Kornei Chukovsky succeeded in breaking Shpet's vociferous opposition and a compromise was reached: Dickens' text was illustrated by Milashevskii, while the original drawings were reproduced in Shpet's volume of commentaries (Iuniverg 51–3). Shpet was also considering a multi-volume edition of Dickens and even a Dickens Encyclopaedia (see his respective book proposals, both written in 1933, at RGB, f. 718, k. 17, ed. khr. 4). While in exile, he tried unsuccessfully to get “Academia” to commission him the translation of *David Copperfield* and the editorship of what was meant to be the first complete Russian translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; he also translated Oliver Goldsmith's play *She stoops to conquer or the mistakes of a night* (the translation, apparently unpublished at the time, is preserved in RGB, f. 718, k. 11, ed. khr. 10 and 11). Earlier on he had served as the editor of the two-volume translation of Thackeray's writings, for which he wrote the notes to *Vanity Fair* (1933–34), and had prepared a partial translation of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (preserved in RGB, f. 718, k. 12, ed. khr. 5).

Shpet's only known translation of German prose are Schiller's letters to Goethe, on which he worked in 1935–37 (the translation is preserved

in RGB, f. 718, k. 13, ed. khr. 6); Goethe's letters to Schiller were entrusted to Mikhail Petrovskii (1887–1937), a literary scholar and Shpet's former colleague at GAKhN, later an exile in Tomsk where he worked as a scholar-bibliographer at the University Library before being rearrested and shot (Serebrennikov 115; 263). Despite Shpet's reluctance to communicate with someone he believed had betrayed him during the inquest, meeting Petrovskii in Tomsk proved eventually impossible to avoid (Serebrennikov 215; 226; 235). The translation published in 1937 (with an Introduction by Georg Lukács) did not carry the name of either Shpet or Petrovskii.

It is, however, Shpet's work as a translator of verse in the 1930s that gives us access to the intricate politics of translation under Stalinism. The 1930s saw the most sustained and energetic campaign to bring to the Soviet reader the works of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European canon. The idea was initially Gorky's, but his pet project (for which the publishing house "Vsemirnaia Literatura" (1918–1924) had been founded) lost momentum after he left the country in the autumn of 1921. It is not by accident that the idea came back precisely in the 1930s. Establishing a new canon of widely read classic works was part of Stalin's cultural politics designed to produce a sentiment of unity and a picture of public consensus built around the supposedly shared aesthetic (read: ideological) values embodied in the Russian and Western literary tradition of the past two centuries. This new canon was more inclusive of works previously branded as representative of the abstract bourgeois humanism which the party-minded art had been encouraged to fight and leave behind. In particular, from the mid-1930s onwards bourgeois realism was in fashion once again, protected by attempts to reach consolidation around a shared anti-fascist ideological platform. The new line did soften for a moment the perception of rigidity which Stalin's cultural policies produced abroad. In 1935, Erenburg, Babel, and Pasternak were able to join the Paris Congress for the defence of culture on an equal footing with their Western colleagues. Pasternak's reluctance there to assign art clearly defined political tasks was indicative of this freshly licensed humanistic outlook.

At home, the subscription to the new canon was meant to conceal the deep rifts and the contest between the irreconcilably different national perspectives and the often incommensurable cultural orientations of the different social strata within the multi-national state. To attain this goal, translation had to be a closely monitored activity (control was made easier by setting up a translation sector within the Writers' Union; the sector met for its first conference in January 1935), and it also had to be proactive and 'practice-orientated', i.e. delivering not just samples of great literary style and craftsmanship but above all versions of the classics that would have a purchase on the everyday lives of their Soviet readers. Thus it comes as no surprise that the practice of literary translation in the 1930s was marked by a serious discord between the principles of faithfulness (to the original) and usefulness (to the target audience). The former principle was branded as "literalism" and had to give way to a culture of translation based on lower artistic expectations and higher political returns. The political war over the

principles of translation was plain to see in the polemics surrounding two of the most ambitious projects of the 1930s: the multi-volume editions of Goethe's and of Shakespeare's works. The first two volumes of the Goethe edition, in the organisation of which Shpet's pupil and friend Aleksandr Gabrichevskii was closely involved, were met with protests at the allegedly low use-value of the translations which failed to provide the Soviet readership with those much needed "current phrases" [khodiachimi vyrazheniiami] that could be of help to propagandists, philosophers and scholars (see e.g. Marietta Shaginian's criticism in "Gete v iubileinom izdanii," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 23 October 1933). Similarly, the "Academia" edition of Shakespeare's works was attacked (notably by Chukovsky and Mirsky) for the misleading "precision" of some of the translations, which allegedly made the access of the Soviet reader to Shakespeare more difficult by obscuring rather than revealing his genius.

Shpet brought to his work as a translator of verse his baggage of unconditional professionalism, rigorous rationality, and sober-mindedness that also marked his style of philosophising. Small wonder then that he would often be reproached for siding with the "literalists". Sometimes this was justified by his occasionally excessive faithfulness to the original; at others, he was simply the victim of an overarching ideological imperative – the 'democratisation' of the classics – which he felt unable to follow.

Shpet's translations of verse in the 1930s included Byron's dramatic poems "Manfred", "Cain", and "Heaven and Earth", as well as "Age of Bronze", and Tennyson's "Enoch Arden", the latter translated in September-October 1935 and first published sixty years later (see Serebrennikov 17–38; 321). Not surprisingly, given the polemics on the philosophy of translation outlined above, his translations of Byron's poems were met with some hostility. Anna Radlova, the wife of stage director Sergei Radlov and a poet in her own right, wrote to Lev Kamenev (in response to Shpet's critical remarks on her translations of *Othello* and *Macbeth*) that she was not prepared to accept Shpet's taste and translation techniques demonstrated in his own rendition of Byron (Kuzmin 228–9). Radlova meant by this Shpet's unbending insistence on precision that on occasion favoured the literal over the creative. Shpet defended himself by responding to Kamenev that eminent poets such as Kuzmin and Pasternak had praised his translation (Kuzmin 229). Accusations of "literalism" were also levelled by Chukovsky and Shklovsky. In February 1934, the latter ridiculed in a letter to Tynianov Shpet's explanatory notes: "it seems that Shpet glossed the word 'crocodile' in Byron by adding a note giving the Latin for it ("Shpet, kazhetsia, k Baironu na slovo krokodil dal primechanie, nazvavshi etogo krokodila po-latyni", quoted in Panchenko 204). Clearly, Shklovsky had an axe to grind (because of Shpet's pronounced anti-Formalist orientation), but for once he was not exaggerating, nor was he making things up (cf. Shpet's gloss in Bairon [Byron] 406).

When considering Shpet's career as a translator of verse, one has to give prominence to his work on the prestigious eight-volume Shakespeare edition published by "Academia" in 1936–1949, under the general editorship of Sergei Dinamov (himself a victim of Stalin's purges, shot in April

1939) and Aleksandr Smirnov (a prominent literary scholar, the author of *Tvorchestvo Shekspira* (1934) and in 1946 one of the three official evaluators of Mikhail Bakhtin's doctoral dissertation "Rabelais in the History of Realism"). In a letter to Stalin written in November 1935 in Eniseisk (probably never sent), Shpet took pride in his role as a member of the working group preparing the edition and pleaded that he be allowed to resume his editorial duties. Before his arrest he had read a number of draft translations by "experienced translators such as Mikhail Kuzmin and Osip Rumer" and had "subjected these to brutal correction" [zhestokoi pravke], although he knew that not everybody would agree with his demand for "super-philological exactitude" ('sverkhfilologicheskoi tochnost'iu', cf. Shpet "Pis'mo" 592). Shpet referred to Smirnov and the poets Kuzmin, Pasternak, and Antokol'skii as potential guarantors for the quality of his work ("Pis'mo" 592).

Shpet's defensive mention of "super-philological exactitude" in this letter is an unmistakable response to those of his critics who favoured the utilitarian principles of translation over precision and philological soundness. The tension between these two attitudes came to be felt acutely as work on the Shakespeare edition progressed. Over time, Smirnov and Shpet had established a smooth and efficient co-operation, with Shpet editing meticulously the translations of several key plays, including *Macbeth* (in this case his contribution amounted in effect to co-translating the play) and *King Lear*. The balance was disturbed when Mirsky was appointed a consultant to the edition, thus strengthening the positions of the 'utilitarian' wing around Chukovsky. In his letters to Shpet, Smirnov objected to this appointment and to Mirsky's written evaluation of the work that had been done so far. He even contemplated leaving his editorial duties but was dissuaded by Kamenev (the relevant letters by Smirnov, of 9 June and 1 November 1934, are in Shpet's estate in RGB, f. 718, k. 25, ed. khr. 25). The situation turned truly unpleasant when Smirnov revealed to Shpet that Chukovsky was plotting to oust the philosopher from the edition (Smirnov to Shpet, letter of 31 January 1935; RGB, f. 718, k. 25, ed. khr. 38, l. 9). Dethroned and fallen from grace after the purges at GAKhN, Shpet was no longer able to defend himself. An article responding to Mirsky's criticisms of S. M. Solov'ev and Shpet's translation of *Macbeth* seems to have remained unpublished; Shpet had to contend himself with a letter seeking Kamenev's support (the typescript of the article and the letter are both at RGB, f. 718, k. 20, ed. khr. 3). The depressing irony in this otherwise banal story of ideological and personal rivalry is that Mirsky himself was soon to become an outcast; he perished two years after Shpet, another victim of Stalinism.

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Our knowledge of Shpet's literary contacts and his work as translator enables us to appreciate the multifarious texture of his intellectual life, particularly in the late 1920s and the 1930s, a stage in his career marked by diversity under duress. During that time Shpet was forced to apply his

energy to a growing number of pursuits, none of which could give him the opportunity to advance his own agenda as a thinker and scholar. The propitious volatility of the first post-revolutionary decade, still tolerant and conducive to creativity, had gradually been supplanted by a climate of ideological control and suppression, the brutality of which left its stamp on Shpet's declining fortunes and his eventual catastrophe. The last – and at the same time most pronounced and most persistent – Westerniser in the history of twentieth-century Russian thought was relegated after 1927 to an increasingly marginal and unfulfilling existence. Rejecting the props of both Marxism and Russian religious philosophy, Shpet was left weathering the storms of history alone, facing his impending end with consummate dignity and stoicism.

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## ■ KNJIŽEVNOST IN ESTETIKA OD »SREBRNEGA VEKA« DO 30. LET 20. STOLETJA

Ključne besede: ruska književnost / literarna teorija / literarna estetika / Špet, Gustav / simbolizem / imaginizem / moskovski lingvistični krožek / prevajalska dejavnost

Key words: Russian literature / literary theory / literary aesthetics / Shpet, Gustav / symbolism / imagism / Moskow linguistic circle

Teoretskega dela Gustava Špeta o literaturi še nihče ni sistematično preučil, prav tako nismo posvetili dovolj pozornosti njegovi splošni navzočnosti na ruskem kulturnem prizorišču v prvih treh desetletjih dvajsetega stoletja. Iz tega razloga sta naše poznavanje in vrednotenje dosega njegovega pisanja in raznolikosti ruskega literarnega življenja iz tistega obdobja manj bogata in široka, kakor bi sicer lahko bila.

Špet je o književnosti pisal iz teoretske perspektive, ki je izhajala iz njegove splošne estetike; prek osebnih prijateljstev in poznanstev, pa tudi prek svojega članstva je igral pomembno vlogo v vrsti neformalnih krogov in tudi v bolj formalno strukturiranih skupinah, denimo v Moskovskem lingvističnem krožku, ki je promoviral književnost, gledališče in vede o njiju; nenazadnje pa je bil Špet dejaven tudi kot ruski prevajalec in komentator številnih del iz kanona angleške književnosti. V članku skušam strnjeno kronološko preučiti Špetov prispevek k tem prepletajočim se področjem. Predvsem poskušam predstaviti dejstva o Špetovi povezanosti s književnostjo in na kratko oceniti njegov prispevek k literarni teoriji 20. let dvajsetega stoletja.

Ta študija je v precejšnji meri mišljena kot prispevek k pravi Špetovi intelektualni biografiji, ki bi se je utegnil kdo lotiti v prihodnosti (za prvi uporabni poskus glej Tatjana Gennadjevna Ščedrina: Pišem kot odmev drugega.). V ta namen sem črpal iz doslej neupoštevanih objavljenih in neobjavljenih virov, pri čemer sem združil različne vrste preučevanj, ki doslej še niso bile povezane. Raziskava, ki se je lotevam, je nenazadnje poskus, da bi razkril Špetove razpršene talente in energijo in – v letih po 1927 – njegovo tragično mnogovrstno življenje pod politično strahovlado stalinizma. Začenjam s pregledom Špetove povezanosti z ruskim simbolizmom in njegovih stikov z imagisti. Nato se osredotočam na njegov prispevek k delu Moskovskega lingvističnega krožka in študij književnosti na GAHN-ju (Državna akademija za znanost o umetnosti). V zadnjem delu ponujam analizo Špetove kariere prevajalca, večinoma iz 30-ih let, ki so jo v dobršni meri zaznamovale ideološke omejitve stalinizma.

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