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2 Fighting Avant-Garde with Phenomenology

Gustav Shpet's 'New Realism'

Liisa Bourgeot

The early Soviet period witnessed various attempts to modernize the Russian humanities. This was seen as a necessary step that would allow the emergence of a truly new society, founded not on bygone traditions but a culture of objectivity and science. The new approach was often directed explicitly against the preceding Silver Age culture, whose mystifying models of thought were to be overcome by an analytical attitude. One would thus shake off the spirit of the 'old Russia' with its dusty nationalism and religious exceptionalism. However, this by no means meant the disappearance of the previous culture. The younger Silver Age generation resettled in the new environment with surprising ease; during the decade after 1917, many forged successful careers in Soviet humanities. Indeed, as Elina Viljanen (2020, p. 209) argues, they came to form the new social class of the Soviet professional intelligentsia, whose ideas played a decisive role in formulating the principles of the culture of the Stalin era.

This chapter discusses Gustav Shpet's (1879–1937) role as a member of the professional intelligentsia, as his case allows us to analyze some of the complexities and irregularities within early Soviet culture. Shpet's phenomenology was solidly anchored in Husserl's transcendental idealism. Yet at a time when religious idealism was being effectively eradicated from the Russian soil, Shpet's philosophy became an acceptable part of the new cultural regime. In other words, phenomenology was differentiated from the branches of condemned idealism and welcomed as a 'scientific' intervention in contemporary philosophy. Meanwhile, Shpet's most influential input to Soviet thought was made in the field of cultural theory. In the first years of the 1920s, he formulated an aesthetic theory based on his original phenomenological conception of the 'inner form of the word' (*vnutrennyaya forma slova*). In what follows, I will outline the emergence of this idea and place it in the context of early Soviet culture.

The idea of 'inner form' was directed against the futurists' avant-garde art and the theories of the *Opoyaz* formalists. In Shpet's opinion, both had been mistaken in focusing only on the outer form of artistic expression and failing to account for *what* was expressed in it. In response to this, Shpet proposed his phenomenologically founded aesthetics of 'new realism' (*novyi realizm*), which strove to express reality as it 'truly is'. Interestingly, whereas his phenomenology had been praised for its modernizing potential, Shpet's aesthetics were, generally speaking, met

with suspicion. They seemed to undermine the achievements of modern poetics, and many considered Shpet's theory of the inner form a mere interpretation of Alexander Potebnya's romantic theory of the spirit of language. Indeed, ignoring the formalists' demand that literature be studied as an independent structure, he treated it as one expression among many of such a cultural 'spirit'.¹

Shpet's anti-formalist conception elicited a surprisingly positive reaction from some Marxist literary scholars, however. His theory was welcomed at the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN, or *Gosudarstvennaya akademiya khudozhestvennykh nauk*, 1921–1931), where Shpet established himself as a Soviet art theorist. He functioned first as the head of GAKhN's Philosophical Department (from 1922) and subsequently as the Vice President of the Academy (from 1924). As Galin Tihanov has argued, this institutional association allows us to view Shpet as part of a 'conservative turn' in early Soviet culture.² *Gakhians* strove to overcome avant-garde as the dominant style of revolutionary art by returning to the ideals of classical Western philosophy. According to Nikolai Plotnikov (2015, p. 72), the Academy's noteworthy pull towards traditional German aesthetics was exceptional in the atmosphere of the 1920s. Indeed, GAKhN strove to distinguish itself by claiming to be the only 'serious' voice in cultural debates and promoting a German-style *Kunstwissenschaft* approach against avant-garde theories. Shpet's phenomenologically founded realism presented a fitting argument for such debates.

The Bolshevik regime respected GAKhN's academic expertise and until roughly 1928 used its predominantly non-Marxist scholars to create an intellectual grounding for a new cultural policy. The duality typical of early Soviet culture is thus well displayed in the case of GAKhN. The Academy has been characterized as a Noah's ark, a haven that offered work to members of the old intelligentsia until the end of the decade; yet GAKhN's political goals were evident. In working for such an institution, Shpet shared the faith of numerous other 'old intellectuals'. Before 1917 he had dreamt of devoting himself entirely to the study of phenomenology and a purely academic life. It might be suggested that Shpet's thinking took a practical turn towards cultural theory, because this was the only way to secure an academic position (and livelihood) under the new regime. At GAKhN, he could make this switch without changing the core of his philosophy, namely the problem of the inner form of the word.

Shpet's Interpretation of Husserl's Phenomenology

Shpet's 1914 commentary on Edmund Husserl's philosophy, *Yavlenie i smysl (Appearance and Sense)*, made him Russia's leading phenomenologist. From the outset, Shpet considered transcendental phenomenology – and more specifically his own interpretation of it – the correct answer to manifold intellectual and spiritual problems faced by Russian society on the eve of the revolution. Soon after returning from his academic sojourn in Göttingen in January 1914, he delivered a speech at the opening of the Moscow Society of Scientifico-Philosophical Questions (*Moskovskoe obshchestvo po izucheniyu*

nauko-filosofskikh voprosov), declaring: ‘The hopeless time, when the “bankruptcy” of the sciences was proclaimed, is being surmounted; the materialist era, when “beggars of the spirit” ascended the throne in philosophy, is at an end’. The subjectivism, relativism, and scepticism typical of modern thought were overcome in a single sweeping gesture as Shpet announced that phenomenology could attain the ‘objective truth’. For him, the discovery of phenomenology meant the beginning of a new era of intellectual clarity, ultimately enabling a new society; ‘We are *already* in it, in its irrepressible striving!’ (Shpet, 1991, pp. 179–180).

Shpet’s impassioned declaration was doubtless motivated by Husserl’s programmatic essay of 1910, ‘Phenomenology as Rigorous Science’. However, four years later, Shpet had drawn his independent conclusions regarding the phenomenological method. Most importantly, he insisted that phenomenology should detach itself from what he considered the ‘negative’ legacy of Kantian philosophy. He suspected that even Husserl remained under Kant’s influence, that is, under the impression that ‘things-in-themselves’ remained necessarily and completely unreachable. In Shpet’s opinion, Husserl had thus not entirely understood the value of his own radical method. He writes in *Yavlenie i smysl* that phenomenology’s greatest advantage lay in its obtaining of its objects ‘simply by means of a shift of the advertence of our “vision”, by means of ... another “attitude”’ (1991, p. 12). According to Shpet, Husserl approached reality without unnecessary theorizing, taking it simply as it appeared. He thought that this was where the power of phenomenology lay. What remained was to prove that reality ‘as it appeared’ was the very being of reality itself. Shpet believed this to be the necessary step going beyond Kant’s phenomenalism, which Husserl had been unable to take.

However, Shpet insisted that the method through which phenomenology could be further developed was already present in Husserl’s theory – he simply had not noticed it. Shpet believed that his teacher’s recognition of empirical and essential intuitions, with their factual and essential correlates, guaranteed that phenomenology could include in its analysis all forms of reality. For Shpet, phenomenology embodied a powerful argument against both scientific positivism and religious idealism, which were the leading intellectual currents in the Moscow of the 1910s. In his opinion, both were equally restricted in their philosophical viewpoints: one relied solely on quantifiable sense data; the other on mystical experience. Both failed to grasp the world in its concrete and full being. In other words, both failed to attain the truth about reality.

Unlike many other (mainly Western) interpretations of Husserl’s phenomenology, Shpet’s reading revealed a strong ontological emphasis. Shpet specified that a philosopher must consider ‘being’ precisely *as* it was experienced through the different intuitions and his focus was thus directed towards consciousness as a special sphere of being, capable of grasping all other forms of being. He discovered consciousness as ‘the completely unique *being* that actually includes *everything*’ (1991, p. 27). Equally importantly, consciousness appeared to Shpet an ‘eidetic region’ because, as he maintained (1991, p. 13), while every being was individual, every cognition of such a being was general. Through consciousness, we might

grasp reality, whether material or immaterial, in its eidetic form of being, thus apprehending its very essence.

Shpet maintained that a crucial aspect Husserl had been unable to see in his own philosophy was how consciousness created ‘sense’, or ‘meaning’. Husserl was able to account for an intuition’s form but not its meaning. It could describe how we perceived something as something ‘physical’, something ‘musical’, or something ‘sentient’, but offered no explication for how something musical proved to be a ‘symphony’ and something sentient a ‘human being’. Shpet formulated his response to the problem of meaning in his subsequent phenomenological texts, published between 1916 and 1917, in which he approached a kind of social ontology of meaning, or phenomenological semiotics. According to Shpet, the only way to explain the fact that different people recognized the same thing through a variety of different intuitions was that their experience was predetermined by a shared understanding of reality: there existed a common rationality, underlying and directing all perception. In his 1917 essay ‘*Mudrost’ ili razum?*’ (‘Wisdom or Reason?’), Shpet came to the crucial conclusion that this fundamental rationality of experience must be of a linguistic form. It was the shared linguistic logic that motivated the recognition of objective meaning in reality; the recognition of a chair, for example, would be impossible if one did not possess the concept of a ‘chair’. Thus, for Shpet, the final form which objects of experience took in cognition was that of the ‘word’ (*slovo*).

What Shpet discovered at the very root of meaning-formation – in the location where, so to speak, the sphere of the mind touched the sphere of the world – was the inner form of the word. This was a kind of teleology inherent in any language, directing the conscious experience of anyone residing in the ‘spirit’ of that language. Thus, the being of reality that we encounter through our various senses and intuitions was for Shpet not only rational but also objectively shared; it was this shared and expressed (i.e. cultural) reality that was for him the truest of all forms of being.

Against Religious Mysticism: Shpet’s Scientific Philosophy of Culture

Shpet had been an acclaimed lecturer already before his stay in Göttingen (in 1912–1914), and after his return a phenomenological school began to form around him in Moscow. A student later recalled that the university’s Husserlians knew that Shpet had ‘answers to all the questions’ and spread a humorous ditty: ‘There is no God but Husserl, / and Shpet is his prophet’ (Levin, 1991, p. 284). Phenomenological courses continued throughout 1917 and after the October Revolution; indeed, the teaching of philosophy at Moscow University remained almost unchanged until 1919, when the curriculum underwent a radical reorganization.

At the end of 1918, Narkompros set up a new faculty of social sciences (*Fakul’tet obshchestvennykh nauk*, or FON), which gradually took charge of the teaching of law, as well as economics and politics. Various history subjects were

either abolished or transferred to FON, and the faculty of history and philology, which oversaw the teaching of philosophy, was reduced to the faculty of philology. With the dissolution of the old faculties, the question eventually arose of how to prepare future specialists in the humanities. Thus, in 1921, seven new scientific institutions were created under FON. Among them was the Institute of Scientific Philosophy, with Shpet elected as its director. He was actively involved in the organization of the Institute, selecting its associates, developing its first study programmes, and fighting to set up a philosophical society, as well as a journal (Kogan, 1999, p. 43).

Leonid Kogan maintains that the designation of the Institute as ‘scientific’ played an important role in its legalization in the intellectual and political atmosphere of the early 1920s. Strictly academic philosophy was considered a reliable option, distinguished not only from mystical and vulgar materialist thinking, but also Marxist philosophy. Indeed, Kogan suggests that the very term ‘scientific’ carried a positive ideological connotation and functioned like a password for the new society. At the same time, its vagueness opened a wide spectrum of possibilities for rationalist philosophy. There was also a tendency (albeit weak) among Russian Marxists to recognize the merits of phenomenology. Especially, Lyubov Aksel’rod, a ‘militant materialist’ in Kogan’s words, was sympathetic to Shpet’s philosophy. In 1925, she hailed phenomenology as a new current that ‘rejects scepticism in the most decisive way’ and defends ‘the self-evidence of objective absolute truth’ (Kogan, 1999, pp. 42–43).

Sympathy between Shpet and Marxist thinkers was perhaps mainly facilitated by their common enemy. In the first years after the revolution, one problem occupied the builders of the new culture above all others: how to purge Russian culture from religious and mystical influences. Shpet’s journal *Mysl i slovo* (Thought and Word) attacked Nikolay Berdyaev’s religious neo-idealism, which had gained new popularity after 1917. Accusing the left intelligentsia of a misguided trust in the people, Berdyaev had asserted that in the enormous mass of workers and peasants, only ‘dark instincts’, not higher truth, could be uncovered (Berdyaev, 1990, pp. 186–187). Instead of trying to attain a collective reform, Berdyaev maintained that the revolutionary culture must focus on refining the spiritual life of the individual. In contrast, Shpet was vehemently opposed to attempts to solve the current crisis through religion. Indeed, he believed that the Russian intelligentsia had remained weak precisely because of its inability to break away from a peculiar Orthodox Christian logic. Directing their intellectual energy to the problems of Russia’s ‘special path’, the Russian ‘soul’, or the myth of Moscow as the Third Rome, the intelligentsia had in Shpet’s words raised the question of *themselves* to the level of a philosophical problem. Russian philosophy had thus proven utopian, and as such it could not lead to any realistic outcome (Shpet, 1922a, p. 36).

To Shpet, the October Revolution represented a necessary end to romantic utopias. Swallowing its own destructive logic, all that could follow the revolution was a loss of direction and a murky transition period, *perelomnoye vremya*. As the foundation for culture disappeared, Shpet argued that the very being of the old Russia had come to an end. The reality which Russians now faced was

not a reality at all but an ‘ontological fiction’ (*ontologicheskaya fiktsiya*). Shpet (1922b, p. 64) asserted: ‘Our history now is an illusion. Our past is ash’. The final judgement had not delivered its promise, the Christian dream was over, and the old intelligentsia had thus lost its legitimation. What Russia needed now was a new intelligentsia, an aristocracy of talent capable of creating a new non-Christian logic for a new culture. For a while, Shpet himself was indeed accepted as a member of early Soviet intelligentsia, but his compatibility with the regime proved precarious. In 1922, Shpet was nearly expelled on the infamous Philosophers’ Steamship; on the night of 16 August, he is reported to have been arrested with the entire Berdyaev Circle. Yet while the members of the circle were deported, Shpet apparently managed to appeal his case through Anatoly Lunacharsky.

The event suggests that Shpet’s phenomenology, which followed in the footsteps of Husserl’s transcendental idealism, was for the moment distinguished from other kinds of philosophical idealism. Nevertheless, the situation was to change very soon. On 20 October 1922, Shpet gave what was probably his last speech at the Institute for Scientific Philosophy. By now his insistence on the purity of philosophical knowledge was interpreted as a demand for the independence of philosophy from ideological and political goals. Shpet lost his position in the spring of 1923; Vladimir Nevsky and after him Abram Deborin were selected as the new directors of the Institute. Henceforth, it was ordered that the Institute’s philosophers adhere to a strictly Marxist and materialistic line (Kogan, 1999, p. 47).

Phenomenological Formalism: Towards a New Logic of Art

The year 1922 was a watershed also for philosophy at Moscow University: non-Marxist philosophy could now no longer be taught. Shpet held his last seminar – on the visibly Husserlian theme of ‘Philosophy as Rigorous Science’ – in May that year. However, many of the participants in Shpet’s seminar had by then also become his followers outside the philosophy classroom, that is, at the Moscow Linguistic Circle (MLC), known as one of the two main schools of Russian formalism. The study of language from semantic and aesthetic perspectives indeed became the main sphere in which Shpet’s thinking evolved during the first years of the new decade. He had become a member of the MLC in 1920, and his aesthetic theory, presented in *Esteticheskie fragmenty* (Aesthetic Fragments, 1922–1923), was formulated in connection with the Circle’s younger generation.

Shpet’s appearance at the MLC shook its institutional structures. After 1920, the group was divided into two competing factions: Shpet’s phenomenological wing and the empirical positivists, led by Roman Jakobson. If the empiricists had previously been the Circle’s dominant force, the phenomenologists now steered formalist thinking towards semantic themes (Pilshchikov, 2017, p. 48). In 1921, the MLC was further fractured when Shpet’s young followers – Maksim Kenigsberg and Boris Gornung – established a group of their own, *Ars Magna*, to broaden the sphere of discussion from linguistics to philosophy. To facilitate such

explorations, they founded a typewritten journal *Hermes* (*Germes*, 1922–1924), which was deeply influenced by Shpet’s thinking (Levinton, 2010, pp. 267–468).

As Gornung attests in his memoirs, his generation felt isolated by their experience of the revolution and identified as the first ‘Soviet youth’. Gornung writes that his generation were ‘children of the turn’ (*det’mi rubezha*), albeit not of the turn of the century, but the revolution. He writes: “‘Ours’ was only the turn itself, in its facing to both sides (and with its “transitional” daily life), but both the eras themselves were foreign in some way’. His generation felt no need to question the revolution – they ‘knew’ only the revolution and looked for new ways of thinking to confirm this experience. This was the source of the *Ars Magna* critique of Andrei Bely, for example, who, they felt, had failed to accept the new reality and formulate a positive aesthetic programme compatible with it (Gornung, 2001, pp. 328).

The call for a new realistic approach was answered in *Esteticheskie Fragmenty*. Its first volume reflected Shpet’s disappointment with the leading figures of Russian culture. Symbolism, he argued, was out of touch: having long dreamt of transcending or even transforming reality, the symbolists had interpreted the war and revolutions as eschatological events. Yet, Shpet argued, the reality that had followed the upheavals proved that symbolism, like most pre-revolutionary Russian culture, had been founded on an illusion. According to Shpet symbolism as a structural quality was necessary for any poetic expression, but it was not enough to explain its nature – it could not be a theory of art. However, his harshest critique was directed at futurism, which he maintained had entirely misconceived the idea of aesthetic expression. The futurists’ transrational *zaum* experiments removed all meaning from poetic words, turning them into mere primitive sounds. Evidently, this in no way complied with Shpet’s structural and semantic understanding of the word’s nature.

For Shpet, language and thus culture were above all meaningful structures. Deriving this view from his earlier phenomenological conclusions, Shpet regarded cultural expressions as formulations of the meaning of reality. Indeed, culture was for Shpet reality in its fullest and most objectively shared form; it provided reality with ‘sense’ and at the same time made it transparent for interpreters. Thus, the perceived meaninglessness of futurist art appeared to him a denial of reality itself, proving the depth of Russian culture’s crisis. Shpet (1922b, p. 47) writes: ‘We do not know what reality is. We have lost it. We dream of it; we do not know *what* it is. Our life has become unreal; our reality has become nonsense’. Futurism, as art that ‘cannibalized’ culture through its theory, was symptomatic for Shpet of the present state of Russia’s lifelessness.

Correspondingly, the *Ars Magna* members were disappointed with the *Opoyazian* formalism, which based its theories on the futurists’ experiments. For them, this approach reflected the old decadentism the symbolists had transferred from France; futurists had merely brought it to its necessarily absurd conclusion (Levinton, 2017, p. 64). *Hermes* also criticized formalism for not having gone far enough in analyzing its own terminology. For example, Kenigsberg attacked Jakobson’s ‘*Noveishaya russkaya poeziya*’ (‘The Newest Russian Poetry’, 1921),

noting that the author had defined poetry as ‘language in its aesthetic function’ but had never spent ‘a minute thinking about the great responsibility incurred by that formulation’ (Levinton, 2017, pp. 65–66).

In contrast, what the second volume of *Fragmenty* offered was precisely a philosophically founded theory of language that treated the ‘word’ as an ‘object’ and explored its different parts and aspects through an ontological analysis. Shpet had earlier defined the word’s inner form as the logic that guided all human experience, formulating a structured and meaningful perception from the crude sense data. Now he treated the word as part of an actual semantic structure such as poetic language. Yet the definition of the word remained very broad for Shpet: it could be almost any distinguishable meaning complex. He writes (1923, p. 10):

‘Khod’ (‘motion’) is a discrete word, as are ‘parokhod’ (‘steamship’), ‘belyiparokhod’ (‘whitesteamship’), ‘bol’shojbelyiparokhod’ (‘bigwhitesteamship’) and so on. The syntactic ‘connection between words’ is also a word, consequently speech, a book, literature, the language[s] of the whole world, all of culture is a word. In the metaphysical aspect nothing prevents the consideration of the cosmic universe as a word. Everywhere, the essential relationships and typical forms in the structure of the word are one.

What defined the word and its nature for Shpet was its inner form: the logic according to which it was formulated. The argument was bound to what he perceived as the fundamental rationality of all experience: our basic vision of things could be objectively shared, thanks to a collective logic. Shpet argued that our minds, in giving meaning to reality through a particular language, automatically functioned according to a certain rational logic. In contrast with this everyday vision, artistic expressions treated their objects through a special poetic logic and could thus follow an aesthetic idea as a guideline for their external form. However – and this was especially important for Shpet – just like rational words, poetic words always expressed some eidetic ‘X’, a ‘thing’, as well. In Shpet’s opinion, this was where avant-garde poetics had been gravely mistaken. The futurists had maintained that the ‘meaning’ of poetry could exist in the acoustic or visual outer form of the poetic expression alone, and that they could thus write poems ‘without content’. In contrast, for Shpet, the meaning of any artistic expression was invariably to be found in the relationship between its object (idea, or content) and its outer form, that is, in its *inner* form. An artistic expression following this model would be ‘realistic’ but in a novel sense; it would express reality not as it was in any naively naturalistic way, but as it was formulated and understood by a collective culture.

Shpet argued that his theory made poetry no less autonomous than it was according to the futurists. He noted that the objects of poetic expression were not things of the empirical world, but ideas – motives and themes – present in the shared spiritual realm – in culture. He explains (1923, p. 66):

In the game of poetic forms full emancipation from *existing* things may be reached. However, [poetic expressions] retain their own *sui generis* logic.

And together they retain *sense*, as emancipation from things is not emancipation from sense Therefore, with transcendental (material) truth and logical truth comes *poetic* truth, as a correspondence of syntagma to the object, albeit really non-existent, fantastical, fictitious, but nevertheless logically formed.

‘New realism’, as Shpet named his new conception of artistic expression, was therefore an attempt to define the ‘poetic truth’ that could only be formulated through the various possible logics of a given culture.

Classical Art as Soviet Art?

On the pages of *Hermes*, Shpet’s anti-futurist idea of new realism was reinterpreted as an aesthetic programme of neoclassicism. According to Kenigsberg, the *Hermes* classicism was distinguished from traditional realism in that it was driven to express not ‘reality-as-such’, but the ‘truth’ itself. He argued that classical art was thus realistic in its own way: ‘Classical art should be called the art of expression – a sign possessing content. Classical art is art as knowledge. Knowledge has as its subject truth. Truth is reality. The truth of art is aesthetic reality’ (Levinton, 2010, p. 472).

If Shpet’s aesthetics offered the *Ars Magna* group an answer to their post-revolutionary *aporia*, it seems Kenigsberg and Gornung offered him in exchange an example of the kind of strict scholarly approach to art he found so lacking in Russia. In *Esteticheskie fragmenty*, Shpet indeed lamented the difficulty of initiating a new artistic style, since Russian culture had for so long been in a state of intellectual decay. He wrote that the new style must be ‘theirs’, formed by the real cultural spirit of the Russian people. However, the problem was that a style could only appear ‘after the school’; ‘But we did not go to school. Therein lay our cultural antinomy’, Shpet (1922b, p. 34) writes. Still, he located the hope of Russian culture in the study of its language as the objective semantic structure that allowed meanings to evolve. The ‘philologists’ secret must be debunked: everyone must become word-lovers, everyone is called to cognition of the cognized’, Shpet (1922b, p. 61) asserts.

As the Moscow Linguistic Circle gradually disintegrated, many of Shpet’s supporters followed him to GAKhN, which had been founded in 1921. The connection between MLC and the Academy’s Philosophical Section was apparent; even the Circle’s library was transferred there (Tihanov, 2019, p. 86). It is thus interesting to consider the influence of Shpet’s cultural theory on the evolution of GAKhN’s highly academic conservatism – a topic whose surface I can only scratch here. According to Fedor Pogodin (1997, pp. 42–43), GAKhN’s interdisciplinary project emerged when two distinct cultural and social developments were converging with a similar need to formulate a unified system and theory for art. On the one hand, at stake was the perceived collapse of the conventional genres and forms of art (not only in Russia, of course), the loss of their boundaries and conditions, and the subsequent clumsy attempts to achieve artistic synthesis.

It seemed to many that art could now be created almost without rules. On the other hand, this crisis of modern art coincided with the Bolsheviks' need to launch the construction project for a suitable Soviet culture.

After the revolution, avant-garde artists had effectively secured their influence in state institutions such as INKhUK and VKhUTEMAS. However, with the end of the Civil War, their agitational outlook had begun to appear unnecessary. According to Selim Khan-Magomedov (1997, pp. 61–64), the founding of GAKhN can be seen as a turning point in the politics of Narkompros: the Bolsheviks' cultural policy now trusted the more 'learned' and 'serious' vision of the Academy. Correspondingly, and even with its complex structure and varied goals, GAKhN's scholars were united under one opinion: their work was directed against groups like Proletkult and LEF, as well as the avant-garde position on the whole of art history. The *gakhnians* did not strive for proletarian art as a radical break-up with the past. Instead, they saw their task as establishing a school of academic aesthetics in Russia from which theories of individual art forms could be derived. The scholarly outlook gave GAKhN credibility in the eyes of the Bolsheviks, who contended that the new cultural policy must be left in competent hands.

The initial structure of the Academy rested on three columns, of which the Physico-Psychological Section was the strongest. The second most important was probably the Sociological Section, which sought to develop Soviet art theory according to the aesthetic views of Marx, Engels, Franz Mehring, Karl Kautsky, and Georgy Plekhanov. Finally, there was the Philosophical Section, directed by Shpet, with Aleksandr Gabrichevsky as his deputy. Although the power of the Philosophical Section within the entire structure of GAKhN was limited, Pogodin (1997, p. 47) suggests that the definitions it drew for specific categories used in art criticism were welcomed across departmental boundaries. In other words, this was the terminological and theoretical foundation onto which a Soviet theory of art would be constructed.

In connection with the terminological project, in June 1923, Shpet organized a special Commission for the study of the definition of 'artistic form'. The texts it produced were subsequently published in a collection entitled *Khudozestvennaya forma* (Artistic Form, 1927), which appeared to be an attack on formalist poetic theories. The problem of the 'inner form' was thus naturally included in its discussions. Aleksey Tsires (1927, p. 5) asserts that in the collection's introduction, the members of GAKhN indeed took up this issue specifically in opposition to 'the so-called formalists of the OPOJAZ type', who restricted their analyses to the word's outer forms. *Khudozestvennaya forma* elicited a critical reaction from Petrograd colleagues. For example, Boris Eikhenbaum expressed his thoughts on GAKhN's publications³ in a letter to Viktor Shklovsky in March 1927, asserting that the book was evidently meant as an attack against them.⁴

Yet Shpet's aesthetic conception of the inner form was not universally accepted, even within the Academy. Instead, it came under harsh criticism especially by Boris Yarkho, a former MLC formalist and the head of GAKhN's Commission for literary translation and the Cabinet for theoretical poetics

(Pilshchikov, 2015, p. 324). In the late autumn of 1924, heated debates took place between Yarkho, Shpet, and their supporters on the topic of ‘the limits of the study of literature’. In Shpet’s opinion, the methodology of literary theory had to be founded on philosophical knowledge. He argued that Yarkho had failed to subject his terminology to a logical analysis and was thus unable to account for the true nature of the poetic word – he treated it just like any other empirical object. Shpet was of course calling for attention to the word’s inner forms, while Yarkho considered the concept ‘unclear and almost useless for the literary theorist’ (Akimova, 2006, pp. 2–3).

Following his earlier philosophical model, Shpet raised the question of the ‘topic’ (*syuzhet*) of the literary work of art, treating it as the ‘ideal content’ of an artwork: the ‘meaning’ (*smysl*), ‘theme’, or ‘material’ that was articulated in an expression, allowing it to gain a concrete form. In his reply, Yarkho attacked such an outlook as outdated and unmotivated, asserting that 90% of lyrical texts ‘satisfy themselves with hackneyed, banal thoughts’, and that poetic art did not require originality at the level of the topic (Akimova, 2006, pp. 3–4). One might thus suggest that even among some *gakhnians*, Shpet’s theory of poetics seemed conservative. In its focus on content and demand for ‘truth’, it swam directly against the main modernist prerequisite of treating the artistic form independently of its content.

In 1927, Shpet also published what has come to be seen as one of his major works, *Vnutrennyaya forma slova* (The Inner Form of the Word), in which the inner form of the word was contextualized in the history of philosophy. By returning the problem of poetic language to the field of philosophy, Shpet seemingly took yet another step away from the formalists’ modernizing project. Interestingly, however, the book gained some support among Marxist scholars, most visibly from Valentin Asmus, a Soviet philosopher of Deborin’s Hegelian neo-Marxist school. In a review article published in 1927 in *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoy akademiy*, Asmus applauded Shpet’s deep understanding of the linguistic turn, which, he argued, was taking place in every sphere of the humanities. In his opinion, Shpet’s treatment of the word’s structure offered an accurate way to analyze cultural dialectics. For him, Shpet presented a powerful argument against ‘vulgar social naturalism’, which reduced the study of social and collective phenomena to an evolutionary analysis of their historical emergence. What Shpet’s work offered instead was a description of the independent – dialectical – laws according to which social and cultural phenomena developed. Asmus concluded that it thereby appeared ‘strange and surprising ... that Prof. G.G. Shpet does not mention the philosophical trend which *first* came out with severe methodological criticism of naturalism in sociology. *That trend is dialectical materialism*’ (Asmus, 1927, pp. 254–258).

Conclusion

By the end of the decade, both Shpet and Asmus had received the dangerous stamp of idealism. GAKhN was purged in 1929, and the campaign of *Komsomol’skaya*

Pravda selected Shpet as the scapegoat for the whole Academy. In his role as Vice President, he was attacked for nepotism and elitism, and his scholarly work was declared of no significance. It was pointed out that GAKhN, with its staff of some 200 people, had no organized party cell and was seemingly slipping out of control. Moreover, the paper suggested that the young postgraduate community of GAKhN was split, and that its 'left wing' was beginning to revolt against its detrimental leadership. According to the writer, only an outside intervention by the Party could end the situation. At the end of 1929, GAKhN's graduate programme was terminated, and Shpet was released from his duties. The following January his membership was removed, and he was formally denounced as the person who had turned GAKhN into a 'mighty citadel of idealism'. Moreover, Shpet was banned from all leadership posts in Soviet education as well as all 'ideological life' (Tihanov, 2008, pp. 261–263).

Famed for knowing 17 languages, Shpet was now only allowed to work on literary translations, and even then under ideological guidance. Between 1930 and 1937, he translated mainly English classics of the romantic and realist canon; Shpet's late career can indeed be seen as contributing to Stalin's large-scale campaign to bring works of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European literature to Soviet readers. Shpet's organizational skills allowed him to take on monumental projects (most of which, however, remained unfinished) such as the collected works of Dickens in Russian, a Dickens Encyclopaedia, and the Complete Works of Shakespeare. In 1934, he collaborated with Vsevolod Meyerhold on his production of *The Lady of the Camellias*, which surprised audiences with its realistic style. Only a year later, Shpet and other members of the editorial team of a German–Russian dictionary were arrested under suspicion of an 'anti-communist' and 'fascist' bias. After his exile to Yeniseysk and subsequently Tomsk, Shpet managed to continue his translation work, most notably, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated between 1936 and 1937. In October 1937, Shpet was arrested in Tomsk; on 16 November he was executed (Shchedrina, 2015, pp. 81–90; Tihanov, 2019, p. 73).

Philosophical work was impossible for Shpet under Stalin. His legacy was removed from Soviet intellectual history and was only rediscovered after his rehabilitation in 1956. Even thinkers with whom Shpet had direct contact, and whose conceptions proved visibly like his – the developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky is the most obvious example – refrained from mentioning Shpet as an influence for one reason or another. Yet Shpet's philosophical and aesthetic conservatism remain relevant for discussions of the evolution of early Soviet culture. The acceptance of his philosophy as part of the official Soviet culture can be viewed as something of an anomaly. It responded to the calls for anti-mysticism and scientific rigour while continuing to be based on Husserl's transcendental idealism. However, once Shpet's phenomenological aesthetics gained the role of a 'founding theory' for Soviet culture, their practical applicability proved unreliable. In Asmus's assessment, Shpet remained a Husserlian and was thus unable to reach beyond a purely descriptive account of culture. He suspected that Shpet's disregard for dialectical materialism in 1927 might have been explained by his continuous

suspension of judgement (‘ἐποχή’) concerning ‘all kinds of explanative theories’. Asmus (1927, p. 264) cites the second volume of *Esteticheskie fragmenty*, in which Shpet declared that they ‘must be feared like the plague or stupidity’ (1923, p. 22).

Shpet’s aesthetics turned out unusable for the new regime; what was ultimately needed was the vastly simpler theory of socialist realism. Yet the fact that his philosophy was part of a conservative turn in early Soviet culture suggests a rich variety of thought that in fact constituted this new culture. Although partly a product of goal-oriented policies, the conservative turn was also part of a larger historical (and not only Russian) tendency born of an accumulation of social, cultural, and philosophical issues. Shpet’s ontological phenomenology, phenomenological semiotics, and aesthetics of new realism can be seen as a single thread in the complex evolution of this phenomenon. As Lolita and Vladimir Kamenev (2019, p. 44) have suggested, although the Soviet state was willing to control all aspects of life, the processes of cultural development remained significantly beyond its reach.

Notes

- 1 For more, see e.g., Dušan Radunović’s ‘The Emergence of Modern Scientific Communities in Late-1910s and Early Soviet Russia: the case of the Moscow Linguistic Circle’ in *Revue des études slaves* LXXXVIII, 1–2, 2017, pp. 137–150.
- 2 Tihanov’s lecture, ‘Aleksandr Gabrichevsky: literaturoved i iskusstvoved’ (27 March 2021), was part of ‘GAKhN Displaced’, an online conference and exhibition organized on the initiative of Ruhr University Bochum. A shortened version of the lecture can be read at <https://gorky.media/context/aleksandr-gabrichevskij-i-sovetskij-intellektualnyj-konservatizm/> (Accessed: 1 September 2021).
- 3 Eikhnenbaum refers not only to Shpet’s *Khudozhestvennaya forma*, but also *Ars Poetica*, which was a near simultaneous publication by GAKhN’s Literary Section, reflecting the theoretical views of Boris Yarkho.
- 4 Eikhnenbaum’s letter (22 March 1927) was published in James Curtis’s book *Boris Eikhnenbaum. Ego semya, strana i russkaya literatura* (Akademicheskiiy proekt 2004, pp. 302–303). The original letter can be accessed at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts.

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