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Book Review: "Gustav Shpet's Contribution to Philosophy and Cultural Theory"

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Gustav Shpet's Contribution to Philosophy and Cultural Theory
Ed. Galin Tihanov
(West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009)

Reviewed by

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Galın Tihanov has edited a volume that provides a comprehensive introduction to the significance of the Russian philosopher, Gustav Shpet (1879-1937), in the development of phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, literary theory, psychology and cultural criticism. The essays cover a wide range of topics, and the sixty page bibliography provides an extensive list of Shpet's work and the commentary and analysis it has generated. Shpet was executed by the Soviet regime, and it is only recently that his work has been available. The volume aims to illuminate why it is profitable to look more than eighty years to the past to recover the legacy of one of Russia's great twentieth-century philosophers.

Readers of this Journal will be most interested in Shpet's efforts to move beyond Husserl's transcendental phenomenology by embracing innovative approaches to the hermeneutical and semiotic traditions. In a remarkable range of work, Shpet anticipated the issues that would occupy contemporary hermeneutical philosophers such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, and contemporary semioticians such as Roland Barthes and the poststructuralist movement. This is fascinating in its own right, but also represents more than mere intellectual history. It is helpful to recover Shpet's work in the early part of the twentieth-century not only to fill gaps in our intellectual debts to the past, but also to recuperate paths that were not fully mapped at the time and that may still prove to be productive. The benefit of the volume is that the authors not only chronicle Shpet's anticipation of what was to come, they also note his potential contribution to ongoing dialogues.

Tihanov's editing is excellent. The volume is divided into five substantive parts, with the sixth part including the superb bibliographies. The five parts include fourteen essays and several short selections of Shpet's work. The authors present concise and well-organized chapters that highlight a feature of Shpet's work and legacy. My only criticism is that Tihanov's nine page Introduction is impossibly brief given the scope of Shpet's life and work. Tihanov does an excellent job of briefly summarizing the essays that follow, but it would have been extremely helpful to provide a more detailed overview of Shpet's principles and concepts to facilitate the reader's ability to understand the individual chapters against a broader backdrop. The individual essays vary in their detail regarding the full scope of Shpet's work, and none provides an overview sufficient for a

volume of this breadth.

Shpet introduced Husserl to Russia, but he lodged a hermeneutical critique of transcendental phenomenology by recognizing the historicity of being. As Gadamer after him, he acknowledged that history was a model of hermeneutical understanding, and that understanding is always hermeneutical. Whereas Heidegger sought to recover originary thinking, Shpet recognized that the weight of history occluded the origin of thinking with the Greeks. Shpet also pioneered the concept of “detachment” as an element of understanding, aligning him more with Ricoeur than Gadamer, but clearly marking him as a post-Heideggerian philosopher at the same time that Heidegger was writing *Being and Time*. He argued that the hermeneutic approach to understanding explained how we can have a reasonable basis for epistemic commitments within the flux of reality. Understanding is a social achievement through language that is historical rather than timeless, but Shpet insisted that this did not in any way devalue the achievements of understanding.

This hermeneutic orientation shaped Shpet’s contribution to semiotics. As Thomas Seifrid argues, Shpet attempted “to elaborate a model of selfhood that is grounded in linguistic consciousness and to establish its ontological security against a variety of perceived threats ranging from materialism to Neo-Kantianism, epistemological skepticism, and relativism.” (181) Shpet’s hermeneutic orientation led him to conclude that the self would be too ontologically fragile except for the fact that it is embedded in the shared semiotic economy of language. “As such, language turns out to concentrate in itself the complex, dialectical interplay between subjectivity and objectivity in general.” (187) This leads Shpet to the conclusion that the very notion of selfhood must be re-constructed in terms of the structure of language.

Contributors situate Shpet’s place in the Russian semiotic tradition in comparison to Bakhtin and Voloshinov. Craig Brandist suggests that Shpet’s efforts to understand the relationship between subject and object were not as productive as Bakhtin’s efforts to understand the intersubjective character of meaning. (196) Dušan Radunović provides a particularly careful comparison of Shpet’s general semiotics and Voloshinov’s “principle of dialogic speech interaction.” (207) Shpet was attempting to navigate between Humboldt and Husserl by affirming the necessary and productive role of the subject, “but he was nevertheless unready for the radical theoretical ramifications of this insight,” because he never fully broke free of Husserlian idealism. (212-13) In contrast, Voloshinov embraced social linguistics as the means by which the world is disclosed, and thereby escaped the subject-object model entirely. (213-17) Nevertheless, Radunović concludes that the two thinkers “shared and pursued at least one important intellectual intuition: that it is the dynamic, ever-emerging and fluctuating reality of discursive communication taken as an integral part of life in society, which has to set the parameters of our approach to language.” (217-18)

The translations of parts of Shpet’s book on hermeneutics were interesting but too limited to provide a substantial benefit to the reader other than giving a sense of Shpet’s style and insight. The first selection is comprised of short excerpts from *Hermeneutics and its Problems* and includes very short commentaries on Augustine, Simmel and Swoboda. Tihanov explains that Shpet offers a “critical history of hermeneutics” in which he “follows Hegel rather than Husserl in seeing understanding and interpretation as social and historical acts.” (221) In these brief excerpts, Shpet argues that Augustine and Simmel appreciated the significance of the “sign,” but they were limited

to a psychological account of hermeneutics that lodged meaning in history, rather than appreciating the historical and social character of understanding. In his discussion of Swoboda and the contemporary situation, Shpet argues that hermeneutical philosophers still fail to analyze the fundamental hermeneutical problem, which is historicity. He emphasizes that history cannot be predicted because of our irreducible freedom (243), identifying the fundamental significance of historicity for understanding eight years before Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

The reader is presented with a comprehensive critical overview of Shpet's significance and excerpts which reveal his penetrating insight. The volume admirably succeeds in justifying the editor's summary in the Introduction:

It thus becomes clear that Gustav Shpet was a major philosopher in his own right, an important interpreter of Husserl, Humboldt, and Hegel, an active participant in the polemics about the emerging trends in Russian literary and cultural theory in the 1910s and 1920s, and a figure of significant institutional impact in the shaping of the Russian and Soviet humanities and social sciences. (2)

We should be grateful for Tihanov's work to make accessible to scholars of semiotics the unrecognized, but still very real, impact of Gustav Shpet.