Gustav Shpet

Russian Philosopher of the Human Level of Being

RANDALL A. POOLE


Gustav Gustavovich Shpet (1879–1937) has a reputation for being a very demanding but equally rewarding thinker, a “philosopher’s philosopher” if ever there were one. That reputation is confirmed by these two excellent volumes, which are written for specialists well versed in European intellectual history and philosophy. Various contributors explicate the theoretical foundations of Shpet’s system, which are in the sometimes esoteric realms of phenomenology (immanent analysis of pure consciousness through reduction to its essential ideas), hermeneutics (which understands human beings as uniquely cultural beings—that is, as creators and conveyors of meaning through the use of signs, especially words), the philosophy of language (which approaches the “word” as the distinctive human capacity), and, at the most general level, ontology (the philosophical discipline concerned with the study of being). Yet despite the complex theoretical grounding, the burden of both volumes is to demonstrate Shpet’s broad relevance to—and deep power to inform—some of the central topics.

I am grateful to Professor George L. Kline for his assistance with this essay.

problems of philosophy, history, and the humanities. Taken together, these volumes thus mark a new stage in Shpet scholarship, a shift from earlier representations of him as primarily a Russian phenomenologist (indebted especially to Edmund Husserl, the principal founder of phenomenology) to appreciation and assessment of his staggering overall significance for the humanities, or for what Wilhelm Dilthey (whose ideas had a major impact on him\(^1\)) termed the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften). As S. S. Khoruzhii (Horujy) writes in Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie, “The Shpet phenomenon is one of those great individual projects of the synthesis of human knowledge created in his time,” an era that also produced (as Horujy notes) the comparable figure of Ernst Cassirer.\(^2\)

Shpet’s first major work was Iavlenie i smysl (Appearance and Sense [1914]). It is a masterful exposition of Husserl’s Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie (Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy, known as Ideas I [1913]); in it Shpet already outlines a hermeneutical revision of phenomenology. Over the next 14 years, he wrote a series of important books, including Historia kak problema logiki (History as a Problem of Logic [1916]), Germenevtika i ee problemy (Hermeneutics and Its Problems [1918]), Esteticheskie fragmenty (Aesthetic Fragments [1922-23]), Vvedenie v etnicheskuiu psikhologiiu (Introduction to Ethnic Psychology [1927]), and Vnutrenniaia forma slova (etiudy i variatsii na temy Gumbol’ia) (The Inner Form of the Word: Studies and Variations on Humboldt’s Themes [1927]).\(^3\) These highly theoretical works advance a system that Alexander Haardt calls “hermeneutical phenomenology” or

---


\(^3\) It was not published until 1989–92, in the Moscow journal Kontekst.

\(^4\) For his edited volume Tihanov prepared two extensive bibliographies of works by and about Shpet. His book contains an introduction, 14 chapters divided into four parts, a fifth part consisting of two translations with introductions, and a sixth part—the two bibliographies.
a “phenomenology of hermeneutical reason” (after 1914 it developed more in the direction of hermeneutics than of phenomenology). Its “leading idea is the correlation of signs (as combinations of expression and meaning) and sign-interpreting consciousness.”” His system took shape under the influence not only of Husserl (with whom Shpet studied in Göttingen in 1912–13 and who considered Shpet one of his most remarkable students) but also of Hegel, Humboldt, and Dilthey, among others. For this reason, George L. Kline has called him a “Russian neo-Husserlian,” a characterization adopted (explicitly or implicitly) by most contributors to the volumes under review.6

Shpet hoped that his phenomenological hermeneutics could provide a philosophical method or theory to integrate the various fields of human knowledge. Like Dilthey, perhaps the best designation for him is philosopher of the human sciences. Fittingly, T. G. Shchedrina, one of the leading Russian Shpet scholars, opens Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie with an inviting chapter on “Shpet and Contemporary Problems of the Philosophy of the Human Sciences.” In it she draws on her prodigious archival research, which has fundamentally deepened our understanding of Shpet, to further elucidate his project of penetrating into the very ideal or “inner form” of rationality.8 Other contributors to the Russian collection who focus on Shpet as philosopher of the human sciences include B. I. Pruzhinin, V. V. Feshchenko, G. L. Tul’chinskii, and E. A. Naiman.

As a whole, these two volumes present Shpet’s philosophy as ultimately an effort to understand what it means to be human: to understand human being (or the human mode of being) as a distinct level of being. For Shpet, that distinctiveness consists in our existence as self-conscious persons, an existence that depends on the word and develops in society and history. His conception entails deep respect for individual human freedom, creativity, and

7 The volume, which stems from a conference held in Bordeaux in 2007, contains 44 papers divided into six parts. The French counterpart is Maryse Dennes, ed., Gustave Chpet et son héritage: Aux sources russes du structuralisme et de la sémiotique (Toulouse: Département de slavistique de l’université de Toulouse II—Le Mirail, Centre de recherches Interculturalité et monde slave, 2008 [Slavica Occitania 26 (2008)])
8 The final section of this volume, “Arkhiv epokhi,” presents some new archival sources. Shchedrina’s works include “Ia pishu kak ekho drugogo…” Ocherki intellektual’noi biografii Gustava Shpeta (Moscow: Progress–Traditsiia, 2004) and Arkhiv epokhi: Tematicheskoe edinstvo russkoi filosofii (Moscow: Rosspen, 2008).
dignity. The common source of the human level of being, of individual human personhood, and of human knowledge is “rational spirit,” communicated and understood through signs. As G. L. Tul’chinskii puts it in a rich and rewarding essay that goes to the heart of Shpet’s philosophy, “The possibility of human knowledge rests on the unity and universality of spirit,” which “manifests itself through the concrete human person, occupying a concrete and unique position in the world.”

Rational spirit is one of Shpet’s key categories. For it he drew, of course, on Hegel, but also on Dilthey’s signature concepts of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the term itself incorporates the idea of rational spirit) and of *Verstehen* (understanding, *ponimanie*, *urazumenie*), the hermeneutical method by which signs (human culture) are interpreted as expressions of inner being or spiritual content. Understanding discloses rational spirit, a process that Tul’chinskii and other contributors to these volumes (notably Robert Bird and Thomas Seifrid, whose essays, in Tihanov, I consider below) see as essential to self-understanding and even as formative of human self-consciousness and of personhood. Hegel’s influence on Shpet is pervasive but is evident especially in his adoption of the concept of objective spirit (*objektiver Geist*), spirit’s self-realization in history. Shpet’s Hegelianism, an important theme of these volumes (especially of the Tihanov collection), brings out the specifically ontological dimension of the concept of the human level of being: in human consciousness, being (reality) becomes abstracted, detached, or suspended from itself (in Hegel’s sense of *Aufhebung*). It becomes an object and as such can be understood. (This process of objectification is also the process of our own self-understanding: we understand ourselves through our objectifications.) Being that is thus suspended, objectified, and made available for understanding (and for self-understanding) is the human level of being. By its nature it is historical, cultural, and (most fundamentally) linguistic. As Gadamer famously put it, “*Being that can be understood is language.*” (Unless I missed it, none of the contributors to these volumes uses the precise phrase “human level of being,” but the concept is implicit in both volumes; it is captured very well by Bird’s superb treatment of Shpet’s idea of culture as detached being.)

Shpet was a brilliant and original thinker in a political environment where brilliance and originality were becoming deadly virtues. In 1910, he was appointed privatdozent in philosophy at Moscow University. He taught there until 1922, when the philosophy department was closed and his position was eliminated. That year, he managed, by appealing to Anatolii Vasil’evich Lunacharskii, to avoid deportation aboard the “philosophers’ steamship.” For the rest of the decade he worked in the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN), heading its philosophy section and serving as its vice-president until 1929. In the 1930s, forced out of GAKhN, he worked as a freelance translator of literature (Dickens, Byron, Shakespeare) and of philosophy (Berkeley and Hegel). Shpet’s most important philosophical translation is the subject of George L. Kline’s chapter (in the Tihanov volume), “Shpet as Translator of Hegel’s Phänomenologie des Geistes.”13 Tihanov’s own chapter, “Gustav Shpet’s Literary and Theater Affiliations,” focuses on Shpet’s increasingly difficult and insecure circumstances after the revolution. It details his involvement with the Russian Symbolists and the Russian Imagists, his impact (largely through the publication of Aesthetic Fragments) on the Moscow Linguistic Circle, his work in GAKhN, his literary translations, and his theater studies and contacts. In these years Shpet endured, in Tihanov’s words, a “tragically multifarious life under the political duress of Stalinism” (56). He was arrested in 1935, exiled to Siberia, and shot in November 1937. Thus ended the life of a philosopher who was, according to Tihanov, the “last—and at the same time most pronounced and most persistent—Westernizer in the history of twentieth-century Russian thought” (76).

Shpet’s philosophical milieu was the Russian neo-idealist revival at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, but his relation to the main currents of Russian idealism is complex. He was an active member of the Moscow Psychological Society, which (despite its name) was the first and main center of the growth of Russian philosophy in this period. A principal concern of the Moscow neo-idealists (Vladimir Sergeevich Solov’ev and his followers, such as the brothers Sergei and Evgenii Nikolaevich Trubetskoi, Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, Pavel Aleksandrovich Florenskii, and Pavel Ivanovich Novgorodtsen) was the philosophical defense of the human person. Shpet shared their concern, as Thomas Seifrid has incisively argued in The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930, from which

---

13 It is also the subject of N. M. Azarova’s chapter in Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie.
his chapter in the Tihanov volume is drawn. Seifrid traces Shpet’s efforts to construct an “ontology of the self” that would defend it not only against materialism and positivism but also against transcendental forms of idealism (such as neo-Kantianism and Husserlian phenomenology itself). Both Shpet and the Moscow idealists feared that pure transcendentalism left the self free-floating and unstable, anchored neither in this world nor in another: they criticized it for a radical “subjectivism” that dissolved the world into the self, depriving the self of an ontological ground outside itself. For them, the self needed to be rooted in being, though they disagreed on the type and level of being, transcendent or immanent.

The Moscow neo-idealists explicitly contrasted their own metaphysical or ontological forms of idealism with the pure transcendental forms, celebrating their own idealism as “concrete,” or rooted, and castigating that of their philosophical foes as “abstract,” or uprooted and afloat. Shpet’s ontology was decidedly this-worldly, in contrast to the theistic metaphysics of the Solov’ev school, but the defense of the self or person was central to both philosophical projects. Both were “ontological” in their insistence that the self be firmly grounded in being. Shpet’s conception of selfhood is taken up by many chapters in the two volumes under review. Several in the Russian collection focus on it, including those by V. I. Molchanov, I. M. Chubarov, N. S. Plotnikov, and G. L. Tul’chinskii, who presents Shpet as chiefly a personolog (theorist of personhood).

Within two years of the publication of Appearance and Sense, and in some respects even within that text, Shpet came to think that Husserl’s focus on pure consciousness and on the transcendental ego (the very capacity for subjectivity or for self-consciousness) did not provide a real, concrete foundation for the self. As Seifrid writes, “It is as if, for Shpet, the self would become too fragile, too ephemeral, if it were not secured in some more stable form (the social collective, for example), and this strain of ontological anxiety with regard to the self, together with the efforts it generates to locate forms of ontological security, represents one of the most significant ways in which his version of phenomenology departs from its Husserlian model.” Shpet found that the primary form of ontological security for the self was social being in its various dimensions—linguistic, historical, cultural, aesthetic. This finding led directly to his “hermeneutical turn” (via Dilthey) and to his embrace of Hegelian objective spirit.

15 Ibid., 146.
Already in Appearance and Sense, Shpet reproaches Husserl for neglecting social being.\(^{16}\) He believes this to be a grave omission because our very being as persons depends on society, on language, and on understanding: “\textit{Absolute social solitude, ‘solitary confinement,’ is the destiny not of the individual, as such, but only of the insane. To forfeit the faculty of intelligible intuition, of comprehension [вразумение] … means to go mad—the sole means of escape from the social union.}”\(^{17}\) While Husserl does integrate linguistic notions (but not social being itself, at least through 1913) into his phenomenology, Shpet goes much further by treating the “word” as a sign whose understanding is basic to thought-formation and to the constitution and coherence of the self.\(^{18}\) There is wide consensus among scholars that this ontological–hermeneutical revision is “Shpet’s Departure from Husserl,” as Thomas Nemeth titles his chapter in the Tihanov volume.

The fact that both Shpet’s phenomenological hermeneutics and Russian metaphysical idealism are “ontological” has led some scholars (including contributors to the two volumes under review) to try to link the former more closely to the latter, and on that basis to associate Shpet with Russian religious philosophy—to which he had long been thought to have little relation. Shpet has given some warrant for these associations, but not much. In several places he distinguishes between two main approaches to philosophy: one negative, the other positive. The negative approach is preoccupied with epistemology (theory of knowledge); Shpet characterizes it as reductive, abstract, and subjective. Its representative movements are diverse and include nihilism, relativism, skepticism, positivism, and especially neo-Kantianism. The positive tradition of philosophy (it alone forms a tradition) is ontological in that its ultimate problem is being; “it has never substituted the problem of knowing what is \textit{real in all} its forms and types for any other problems.”\(^{19}\) In this tradition, Shpet writes, “Philosophical knowledge is always and essentially knowledge...

---


\(^{19}\) Shpet, \textit{Appearance and Sense}, 3 (italics in original).
that is concrete and integral.”\textsuperscript{20} In it he includes Western philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, Hegel, and Husserl, and Russian philosophers such as P. D. Iurkevich, V. S. Solov’ev, S. N. Trubetskoi, and L. M. Lopatin. In a broad sense, the positive tradition is metaphysical. As Shpet wrote in 1903: “We cannot but introduce metaphysics into science. It is richer than experience because it is closer to life. Philosophical idealism is required to give us an objectively grounded ideal, and we have to welcome it and realize all empirically possible social ideals on our way to the kingdom of ends.”\textsuperscript{21}

Two places where Shpet explicitly invokes the Russian metaphysical tradition are \textit{Appearance and Sense} and his 1916 essay “Soznanie i ego sobstvennik” (Consciousness and Its Owner). In the last two pages of the final chapter of \textit{Appearance and Sense}, Shpet discusses mystical experience, which he says “is a satisfaction of the demand that the comprehensible \textit{Spirit} itself makes for its ‘acceptance.’ The elimination of ‘solitude’ through the common feature of birth and the consanguinity of all that is ‘rational’ in an all-encompassing social union and in the motivation of Its Objectifications is, in this sense, the pillar \textit{[stolp]} of Spirit itself.” Two paragraphs later, Shpet quotes Pavel Florenskii’s book \textit{Stolp i utverzhdenie istiny} (The Pillar and Ground of the Truth [1914]), to which quotation he attaches a lengthy footnote with additional quotations.\textsuperscript{22} Shpet’s discussion of mystical experience, though

\textsuperscript{20} “Filosofia i istorii” (1916), in Shpet, \textit{Mysl’ i slovo: Izbrannye trudy}, ed. T. G. Shchedrina (Moscow: Rosspen, 2005), 192–94, as quoted by O. G. Mazaeva in her chapter, “Fenomenologicheskie proekty v Rossi nachala XX veka i otnoshenie ikh sozdatelei k traditsii kantianstva,” in \textit{Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie}, 360–72, here 365 (italics removed); this text is also quoted by T. G. Shchedrina, “Gustav Shpet i sovremennye problemy filosofii gumanitarnykh nauk,” 18. For “concrete” and “integral,” Shpet refers to Vladimir Solov’ev’s \textit{Filosofskie nachala tsel’nogo znaniia} (1877), to S. N. Trubetskoi’s “concrete idealism,” and to L. M. Lopatin’s “concrete spiritualism.” On his distinction between negative and positive philosophy, see also Kline, “Meditations of a Russian Neo-Husserlian,” 149; and Grier, “Adventures in Dialectic and Intuition,” 333–34.


\textsuperscript{22} Shpet, \textit{Appearance and Sense}, 163–64. Translation slightly modified (“Objectifications” for “Objectivations”).
brief and enigmatic, does seem to be significant, in that he relates it to two central features of his philosophy: social being and rational spirit. Moreover, he returns to the subject of mysticism in his last book, *The Inner Form of the Word*, where he again relates it to rationalism.

In “Consciousness and Its Owner,” Shpet draws on Vladimir Solov’ev’s article “Pervoe nachalo teoreticheskoi filosofii” (The First Principle of Theoretical Philosophy [1897]) and on Sergei Trubetskoi’s lengthy essay “O prirode chelovecheskogo soznaniia” (On the Nature of Human Consciousness [1889–91]) in support of his social conception of consciousness. At one level, his ideas of the “I” in this essay—a “concrete social thing” or “object,” an imiarek (an individual person designated by his or her first name but who cannot be further defined), and simply the pronoun “I” for the particular person using it—seem rather far removed from Solov’ev’s and Trubetskoi’s idealist metaphysics of all-unity (vseedinstvo). But at another level, Shpet was clearly impressed by Trubetskoi’s argument that it is in society that higher objective ideals form. There, the human spirit is objectively realized and human beings become “objective” persons as they recognize each other as ends-in-themselves possessing an unconditional dignity. Both Solov’ev and Trubetskoi helped give Shpet a deeper philosophical understanding of the seemingly ordinary notion that my self-consciousness emerges and develops through interaction with others, that I am shaped by my community, and that therefore my self-consciousness is also a social, collective consciousness that is the “property” ultimately of no single owner. Trubetskoi, in particular, seems to have been an important influence on Shpet. In “Vera v bessmertie”

---


25 In these formulations Shpet wishes to avoid any philosophical subjectivism that abstracts the ordinary “I” and turns it into a transcendental or metaphysical conception. His concern is that idealist notions of the subject, self, or even of the person displace the real, empirical individual, who is unique and irreplaceable, a “concrete and singular thing.” V. I. Molchanov notes the paradoxical result: “In Shpet the struggle with subjectivism turns into objectivism.” See his “Problema ‘Ia’ u Gustava Shpeta: Ot termina k konceptsi,” in *Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie*, 83–93, here 90. He devotes his entire chapter to “Soznanie i ego sobstvennik,” of which he is highly critical. By contrast, I. M. Chubarov, “Problema ‘Ia’ v germenevticheskoi filosofii Gustava Shpeta,” in *Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie*, 94–102, endorses Shpet’s approach from a postmodernist perspective (comparing him to Gilles Deleuze).

Belief in Immortality [1902–4]), he formulates one of Shpet’s main themes: We get beyond the limits of subjective consciousness through our community with other persons—a community “enabled by all possible manner of external physical signs, which serve as the expression of spiritual content.”

On the basis of Shpet’s references to Solov’ev, Trubetskoi, and Florenskii, Maryse Dennes speculates about “Vladimir Solov’ev and the Legacy of Russian Religious Thought in the Works of Gustav Shpet,” her short chapter in the Tihanov volume (“works” being the two indicated in the paragraph above). Steven Cassedy goes even further in his chapter, “Gustav Shpet and Phenomenology in an Orthodox Key.” He claims that Shpet combines Husserl with “the fundamental Platonism of Orthodoxy, the doctrine of incarnation, and the related notion that matter is to be venerated” (98). He includes the theology of icons in his discussion. (Tihanov signals his skepticism by referring in his introduction to “Cassedy’s imaginative reading.”)

Sergei Khoruzhii, in Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie, is more cautious. He writes that “Shpet’s human project, by virtue of its global scope, would have to encompass religious being and phenomena of religious experience” (132). Certain factors kept Shpet himself from pursuing the religious problem in his work, not least his complex and contradictory personal views (Khoruzhii refers to Shpet’s anti-Christian attacks in his 1917 essay “Mudrost’ ili razum?” [Wisdom or Reason?]). Nonetheless Khoruzhii considers hermeneutical-phenomenological analysis of religious experience to be one of the intended applications of Shpet’s project. He himself has undertaken such an analysis, in particular of hesychast spiritual experience, in works such as K fenomenologii askezy (1998). He divides his chapter in Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie into three parts, which show how Khoruzhii eclectically combines hesychasm and phenomenology: Coptic reduction, Sinai intentionality, and Athenian noesis.

N. S. Plotnikov also pursues the issue of Shpet’s relation to Russian religious philosophy. His chapter is one of the best in Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie. See his “Ontologicheskie osnovaniia filosofii iazyka ‘pozdnego’ Shpeta,” in Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie, 244–52, quotation at 252.
The author begins with the observation that the problem of the understanding of individuality has been at the center of hermeneutics ever since Friedrich Schleiermacher. That problem was first formulated along linguistic-philosophical lines by Humboldt. His famous formula that language is *energeia* (ongoing productive process) rather than *ergon* (finished product), that it is the “eternally repeating work of the spirit,” resonated in broad circles. Humboldt’s definition of language as *energeia* and his concept of “inner verbal form” constituted, in Plotnikov’s judgment, a paradigm shift in the understanding of human subjectivity. Shpet’s *The Inner Form of the Word: Studies and Variations on Humboldt’s Themes* was the culmination of the Russian reception of Humboldt at the beginning of the 20th century, which reception brought about what Plotnikov terms (in English) a “linguistic turn” in Russian thought. The “word” was discovered as “the principle of the constitution of man’s relation to the world” (105). In understanding the word as a central philosophical problem, two different approaches were possible: religious-philosophical and scientific-philosophical. Florenskii took the first approach and Shpet the second. Both, however, were very much interested in the problem of the understanding of the individual and of its expression in language, Florenskii from a theological perspective, Shpet “in the context of the phenomenological-hermeneutical grounding of the human sciences” (106).

By 1918, Shpet had completed his “hermeneutic turn” with the appearance of *Hermeneutics and Its Problems*, the first Russian text on hermeneutics. This work occupies Robert Bird in “The Hermeneutic Triangle: Gustav Shpet’s

---

29 N. S. Plotnikov, “Ot romanticheskoi germenevtiki k fenomenologii izyka: Fridrikh Shleiermacher, Pavel Florenskii, Gustav Shpet.”

30 Vladimir Zinchenko and James V. Wertsch highlight Shpet’s adoption of Humboldt’s formula in their examination of his likely impact on Lev Vygotskii and of the parallels, in particular, between Shpet’s *Vnutrenniaia forma slova* and Vygotskii’s *Thought and Language* (1934). See their chapter, “Gustav Shpet’s Influence on Psychology,” in *Gustav Shpet’s Contribution*. See also V. P. Zinchenko’s wide-ranging essay, “Plavil’nyi tigl’ Vil’gel’ma Gumbol’dta i *Vnutrenniaia forma slova* Gustava Shpeta v kontekste problemy tvorchestva,” in *Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie*.

31 Dennis Ioffe, too, compares Shpet with Florenskii. Ioffe, “Gustav Shpet, religiia i problema Znaka: Imiaslavie vs. fenomenologia i semiologii,” in *Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie*. He observes that Florenskii’s philosophy of language—like Sergei Bulgakov’s and Aleksei Losev’s—developed in part out of the contemporary controversy over *imiaslavie* (veneration of the name). The *imiaslavie*, drawing on the basic hesychast distinction between the divine *ousia* (essence) and its manifest *energeia*, held that the divine energies were immanent in God’s name. Ioffe wonders whether the *imiaslavie* controversy might have had something to do with Shpet’s embrace of Humboldt’s definition of language as *energeia*. 
Aesthetics in Context,” his masterful chapter in Tihanov. According to Bird, Shpet “was the first Russian thinker to appropriate the term hermeneutics for the type of philosophy which views knowledge primarily as understanding” (28). Bird emphasizes Shpet’s “profound indebtedness” to Dilthey, whom he (Shpet) followed in making understanding a central philosophical concept because it offered “scientific knowledge of the personality” through the interpretation of signs (30).32 “A psychical experience finds outer expression in signs,” Bird explains, “which are then understood by being read back to their origin in inner experience” or to their origin in the human spirit (31). This is the hermeneutical method. Shpet wanted his own phenomenological hermeneutics to combine what was best in Husserl, Dilthey, and Hegel, so that it would be permeated (in his words) with an “all-penetrating rational spirituality” (31). “Spirit as the object of understanding is rational spirit,” he wrote (32). “With this link to spirit,” Bird remarks, “understanding becomes the center of an entire metaphysics”—a metaphysics of this, the immanent world, a metaphysics whose task was to provide not only “scientific knowledge of the personality” but also a more secure ontological ground for it than pure phenomenology alone could offer (30).

Bird’s main subject is Shpet’s aesthetics. In his estimation, “The most pressing problem for Shpet was to define the specificity of aesthetic being within the broader realm of concrete or understood reality (what he calls culture)” (34). Bird guides us through three main steps to that specificity. First, he reminds us that for Shpet “human understanding changes the status of reality itself by creating a separate realm of meaning” (33), which realm (culture) is detached or suspended being—what I have termed “the human level of being.” Second, art is not only detached but doubly detached, “first as rational content and then as fictional form” (34). Third, Shpet’s definition of the specificity of aesthetic being “allows him to isolate the concept of detachment and to define it more precisely as a condition of understanding” (35). In the last two parts of his chapter, Bird relates Shpet’s aesthetics of detachment to the two other sides of “the hermeneutic triangle,” Aleksei Fedorovich Losev and Viacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov. His remarkable demonstration that “Shpet’s aesthetics is merely the clearest example of his overall hermeneutic philosophy” (36) enables us to better appreciate the other chapters on aesthetics in these volumes (Alexander Haardt and Tihanov in the Tihanov volume; V. V. Arismov, M. K. Gidin, R. Griubel, N. S. Poleva, Tihanov, and others in Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie).

32 Bird quotes G. G. Shpet, Germenevtika i ee problemy, in Mysl’ i slovo: Izbrannye trudy, 248–418, here 382. Bird’s two additional Shpet quotations that I have used in this paragraph are from this source (412–13).
In the late 1930s or early 1940s, Mikhail Bakhtin worked on a text under the provisional title “Toward the Philosophical Grounds of the Human Sciences.” There he was preoccupied with the problem of understanding. Some of his fragmentary formulations, as Bird indicates, recall Shpet’s, including the following: “Knowledge is understanding of the past in its unfinalizability (its non-coincidence with itself)…. Understanding as a seeing of … the living meaning of experience and expression, the vision of what is inwardly meaningful, so to speak, of a self-meaningful phenomenon” (37). Bird’s essay is one of many in these two volumes that discuss the multiple parallels between Shpet and Bakhtin, that other 20th-century Russian philosopher of the human level of being.  

Bird regrets that despite Shpet’s and Bakhtin’s mutual interest in the philosophical foundations of the human sciences, “this rather academically-sounding problem has failed to gain traction in the largely para-academic world of Russian philosophy” (38). The appearance of Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie is an encouraging development, since (as I have noted) a number of its contributors take up this very problem. They place the philosophical foundations of the human sciences not only in hermeneutics but also in the closely related field of semiotics (the differences between these fields, as Shpet conceived them, are not altogether clear). For example, V. V. Feshchenko, in “Gustav Shpet and the Hidden Tradition of Deep Semiotics in Russia,” states that Shpet was the first to use the term “semiotics” in Russian scholarship and that he defined it as “the ontological theory of signs in general” (165–66). In History as a Problem of Logic, he wrote that historical knowledge is “always knowledge supposing understanding [urazumenie] or interpretation as a means of understanding. Such a type of knowledge can be called semiotic knowledge.” In “Iazyk i smysl” (“Language and Sense,” probably from the first half of the 1920s), Shpet calls semiotics “the science of the understanding

---

33 M. M. Bakhtin, “K filosofskim osnovam gumanitarnykh nauk,” Sobranie sochinenii (Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1996), 5:9, as quoted by Bird.
34 Apart from Shpet, Bakhtin is the Russian thinker referred to most in each volume. In Gustav Shpet’s Contribution, Craig Brandist’s “Problems of Sense, Significance, and Validity in the Work of Shpet and the Bakhtin Circle” is dazzling in its erudition. In Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie, three chapters (by L. A. Gogorishvili, R. Griubel’, and N. L. Vasil’ev) are devoted to Shpet and Bakhtin. In his earliest sustained work, Toward a Philosophy of the Act, Bakhtin recommends phenomenology as a first philosophy. I explore his phenomenological approach in my essay, “The Apophatic Bakhtin,” in Bakhtin and Religion, ed. Susan M. Felch and Paul Contino (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 151–75.
ponimanie] of signs." In Feshchenko's cogent explanation, understanding is the dynamic realization of sense (the process of thought itself) through the “inner form” of the word as sign. Shpet uses the concepts of understanding and inner form to emphasize human creativity (Bakhtin’s “unfinalizability”) and to put the human person at the center of the semiotic process. In contrast to Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, Shpet’s semiotics is chelovekomerna (human), which quality forms the hidden Russian tradition of “deep semiotics” (171). Tul’chinskii also highlights this tradition, which he characterizes as “personological” (185).

Shpet’s importance as a philosopher of the human sciences is nowhere clearer than in his work in the theory and philosophy of history. The Tihanov volume includes two reliable guides: Peter Steiner’s “Tropos Logikos: Gustav Shpet’s Philosophy of History” and Ulrich Schmid’s “The Objective Sense of History: Shpet’s Synthesis of Hegel, Cieszkowski, Herzen, and Husserl.” Shpet’s opus magnum in the field is his massive History as a Problem of Logic. The logic he refers to is a hermeneutical one. “History is at its core ... a hermeneutic science,” he wrote, because it is the preeminent realm of the word. It therefore models the hermeneutic approach in all the human sciences. This is one reason why he believed that “our philosophy is turning above all into a historical philosophy.” In another place he wrote, “History is finally the reality which surrounds us, and philosophy has to start with its analysis. Solely in history does this reality present itself in its unconditional and singular [edinstvennoi] fullness.” These words are quoted by Schmid, who nicely presents Shpet’s Hegelian philosophy of history. He shows that Shpet accepted Hegel’s concept of rational reality, which the Russian philosopher understood in terms of “Hegel’s gradation of being on which consciousness dialectically rises from the dim immediate sensual givenness to the last speculative rational givenness of spirit and the absolute.”

---

37 In Gustav Shpet i ego filosofskoe nasledie, see L. A. Mikeshina, “Logika kak uslovie i osnovanie nauchnoi strogosti istoricheskogo znanii,” and A. P. Liusyi, “Ot logiki istorii k ee zhanram.”
of being, which is to say that history makes reality rational, raising it to the human level. But Shpet insisted that the historical-rational process unfolds not of its own accord but through human agency and aspiration; in this his interpretation of Hegel benefited from his study of August Cieszkowski and of Alexander Ivanovich Herzen.

The Hegelian framework is also an important one for Shpet’s signature concept of the “inner form of the word,” as Steiner indicates and as Seifrid explains. In The Inner Form of the Word, Shpet drew not only on Humboldt but also on Hegel (Humboldt’s own philosophy of language took shape in Hegel’s powerful wake). His “wholesale exploration of romantic-idealist thought,” Seifrid observes, “amounted to a remarkably defiant gesture in the officially materialist Soviet intellectual climate.”42 In his expert summary of Shpet’s account (in The Inner Form of the Word and in the earlier Aesthetic Fragments), Seifrid writes that language concentrates “in itself the complex, dialectical interplay between subjectivity and objectivity in general.”43 This interplay is itself “inner form” (or very close to it) and the matrix within which the self forms. Shpet understood (in his own words) that “without language no object can exist for the soul,” and that it is precisely objectivity which is essential for self-recognition.44 (In Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel famously contends that the self recognizes itself in the objective world.)45 Seifrid concludes that the “inner form” of the word “thus emerges as a set of relational rules by which thought takes on expressive form and through which the objective world is adequately given in consciousness—that is, the locus in which mind encounters the objective world, which is very close to saying, ‘the self.’ ”46

Shpet’s philosophical conception of the self found concrete expression in his defense of the freedom and dignity of the human person. He made this defense most powerfully in his 1921 essay Herzen’s Philosophical Worldview. According to James P. Scanlan in his excellent chapter in the Tihanov volume:

The individual person (lichnost’), Shpet writes, was the “fiery center” of Herzen’s outlook, and individual dignity requires “absolute freedom” (Filosofs’ko mirovozzrenie 24, 34). Shpet lauds Herzen for adhering

---

46 Seifrid, “Sign and/vs. Essence in Shpet,” 188.
steadfastly to these ideals of individual dignity and freedom against all temptations to endorse fatalism, reject individual responsibility, and yield to the importunate demands of “abstractions” such as justice, state, and society. The person, Shpet agrees, must not be subordinated to any other value—a conviction, as George L. Kline has shown, for which Herzen was deeply indebted to Hegel (186–89).

In particular, Shpet abhorred the individual’s instrumentalization for the sake of an imagined future, as Scanlan makes clear (95–96). Herzen too, for the most part, rejected such instrumentalization, and here Shpet saw the benign influence on him of Hegel.48 In part for this reason, Philip T. Grier writes that Shpet “should be credited with a very great advance in the understanding of Hegel,” especially compared to certain earlier Russian (mis)interpretations of him.49 Philosophy, of course, is one dimension of the human level of being, and Shpet feared for its fate under the Bolshevik regime. That helps explain why, as Scanlan argues, he made (notably in the Herzen essay, within a few years of the revolution) such an “impassioned defense of the humanistic values that make possible … the flowering of philosophy” (95).

Shpet’s defense, at least in his own time, was in vain: his tragic personal fate reflected the fate of Russian philosophy under communism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, his human project has attracted broad interest among Russian philosophers and humanities scholars. According to Shchedrina, this is an indication that they “finally really are restoring the continuity of the Russian philosophical tradition” (19). These volumes enable us to appreciate, better than ever before, Shpet’s extraordinary contribution to that tradition.

Dept. of History and Politics
The College of St. Scholastica
1200 Kenwood Avenue
Duluth, Minnesota 55811 USA
rpoole@css.edu

47 Scanlan, “The Fate of Philosophy in Russia,” 95. Scanlan’s last parenthetical reference is to Kline, “Gustav G. Shpet as Interpreter of Hegel.” The first is to Gustav Shpet, Filosofskoe mirovozzrenie Gertsena (Petrograd: Kolos, 1921). Shpet’s other book-length study in this field is Ocherk razvitija russkoj filosofii (1922).