A Review of G. G. Shpet’s Hermeneutic-Phenomenology*

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Based on the analysis of the philosophical source and the epistemological roots of G. G. Shpet’s hermeneutic-phenomenology, this article states that G. G. Shpet, as an important Russian representative of the turn “from ontology to epistemology” in the philosophy of language, not only inherited Husserlian phenomenology, but also combined phenomenology and hermeneutics together as to develop a unique form of hermeneutic-phenomenology, which is based on Husserl’s phenomenology, deeply influenced by Dilthey’s hermeneutics, and inherited Humboldt’s philosophy of language to some extend as well. Besides, the author points out that some of G. G. Shpet’s thoughts were also inherited from Slavophile and Moscow school of metaphysics.

Keywords: G. G. Shpet, hermeneutic phenomenology, philosophy of language, Husserl, ontology, epistemology

Gustav Gustavovich Shpet (1879-1937) was a famous Russian philosopher, psychologist, art theorist, and translator of philosophy-art theory. While still studying at university, he showed extraordinary talent and academic potential. His thesis for Kiev University published under the title “The Problem of Causality in Hume and Kant: Did Kant Answer Hume’s Doubt?” received a gold medal and was published in a university academic journal. Upon graduation from university, he traveled to study at the University of Göttingen in Germany from 1912 to 1913. Shpet learned from his research supervisor Husserl and specialized in Husserlian phenomenology. After returning to his home country in 1914, he published his first book in the subject titled Phenomenon and Meaning and provided a creative interpretation of Husserl’s book The Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy (1913). In 1918, he began his career as a professor in the historical-philological faculty at Moscow University. His other manuscript, Hermeneutics and Its Problems, was initially planned to be published in the same year, but for political reasons, it was only released between 1989 and 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was because of this that Shpet was not well-known to the worldwide academe for a long time. It was only in the 1990s that Russia started a wave of attention toward Shpet. But we can find the discussions about him from such leading scholars as Erazim Kohak, Hayden White, and Peter Steiner from the United States, Tihanov Galin from the United Kingdom and some other scholars from Germany and France.

Chapter 1

The hermeneutics developed by Shpet borrows many types of origins of thought. While they can be traced back to Plato’s theory in ancient Greece, the primary sources include Husserlian phenomenology, Dilthey’s hermeneutics, Humboldt’s philosophy of language, the “sobornost” concept from the Slavophiles1, and the

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1 Slavophiles interpret it as “unification in many ways” and “unity of freedom” of people.
“philosophy of unity” by the Moscow school of metaphysics. At the beginning of the 20th century, the relationship of Russian philosophy of language with ontology was inseparable from the famous Wittgenstein philosophy that prevailed at that time. This could be clearly seen from the philosophical thinking of the school of linguistic ontology in Russia, which was mainly represented by Pavel Florensky and Mikhail Bulgakov of the Moscow School of Metaphysics. They believed that language is a rational reflection of reality, and words are the essence of such existence. It revealed the possibility and necessity of unity between subject and object, ontology and phenomenon, and cognition and existence (Xiao, 2007, p. 89). Shpet’s philosophy of language originated after the epistemological turn. However, he did not abandon the philosophical tradition of the Russian linguistic ontology. Instead, he began to study Husserlian phenomenology based on that tradition and then established the unique phenomenology-hermeneutic.

Shpet’s inheriting of Husserlian phenomenology is mainly reflected in his work Phenomenon and Meaning. The book is the first detailed study in philosophical literature of Husserl’s The Concept of Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy, both in Russia and worldwide. In Shpet’s own words, the purpose of his book was first to introduce the ideas of Husserlian phenomenology to the Russian academic community. With this initial intention in mind, he endeavored to limit the structure of the theory to the framework of traditional phenomenology. However, he borrowed Dilthey’s hermeneutic method to criticize and transform Husserlian phenomenology, so in his book, terms that did not appear in Husserl’s book are used many times, such as “understanding” and “state”. Although Shpet’s hermeneutics is concrete, it has undoubtedly been marked with Russian philosophical traditions. And the ontological tradition of Russian philosophy is reflected in his writings, such as Phenomenon and Meaning (1914), Aesthetic Fragments (1922-1923), Hermeneutics and Its Problems, The Inner Form of the Word (1927), and Introduction to Ethnic Psychology (1921).

In the history of the Russian philosophy of language, the Slavophiles held a distinct position regarding the ontology of language; thus, philosophical issues in their works tended to be ontological in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. As for the Slavophiles, the meaning of philosophy is entirely raised from belief as a whole and depends on the establishment of belief, which is based on putting life above cognition and putting ontology on epistemology, thus distinguishing Russian philosophy from Western European philosophy. The leader of the school, Khomiakov, even regarded belief as the “first reality of the spiritual world”. Following the Slavophiles, the founder of the Moscow school of metaphysics, Solovyov pointed out that “the real meaning may lie in the form of reason or the unity of everything ... That is, it depends on the original relationship between the content and everything in the unity or the unity of all things”. He drew on the Slavophiles’ complete knowledge of general beliefs, thoughts, and experiences, as well as Spinoza’s concept that “the world is in the spirit of the unity of all things”. He then proposed the metaphysical concept of the unity of all things and suggested that in terms of truth, “everything is all that exists” (Zenkovsky, 2001, p. 311). The school has shown clear Neoplatonic tendencies. Its representatives include the Trubetskoy brothers and Lev Mikhailovich Lopatin, all of whom studied and taught at Moscow University in different periods and whose thoughts influenced many teachers and students there. Shpet denied metaphysics and regarded it as pseudo-philosophy and a failure of philosophy, and he resolutely opposed interpreting the duality of “phenomenon” and “meaning” with metaphysics. However, it is not surprising that he was influenced by metaphysics as a professor of philosophy.

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2 The philosophy believes that truth is not an abstraction contained in everything, but a concrete inclusion of everything in itself.
at that time. The Trubetskoy brothers carried over Solovyov’s epistemology and metaphysical systems, and their exploration in philosophy shares the spirit of the Slavophiles’ Sobornost theory.

Shpet was sure about the “unity of things” provided by “phenomenon” and “meaning”, which first reflects the influence of the Moscow school of metaphysics on him. Of course, the concept of “social” that was proposed by Shpet is very similar to the idea of “unity of all things” at the school:

Take a specific type and form of existence as an example: social being. How to study it? We replace the other dimension of objectifying symbols with words and logical expressions, where we can grasp some real secrets and the existence of them.... (Zamaleev, 2009, p. 198)

His theory shares the origin of Russian philosophy, which is “more of a philosophy about man, about man’s fate and path, the meaning and purpose of history” (Zenkovsky, 2001, p. 197). It is also consistent with the theory of sobornost of the Slavophiles, which emphasizes the trinity of “belief-society-man”. Moreover, Shpet had already put forward the idea of “social existence” in the book *Phenomenon and Meaning*, which was published in 1914, while *Existence and Time* of Heidegger, another representative of philosophy of existence, was published in 1927. Heidegger was also influenced by Husserl, but it can be argued that Shpet’s thinking about “social existence” predated Heidegger.

Furthermore, Shpet was also inspired by Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt’s philosophy of language. To Shpet, “rational intuition” is the only source of history as a scientific object, and language is the object of history. To Russian scholars, his book *The Inner Form of Word* (1927) is a cornerstone of system research on Humboldt’s theory. In the book, he focuses on explaining Humboldt’s idea of linguistic consciousness. He agreed with Humboldt that “language is linguistic consciousness; language is the inner itself and a spiritual activity”. He emphasized the role of language in the interrelationship between man and reality. It is pointed out that words do not necessarily refer to the lexical, syntactic, or rhetorical structure, nor their planar distribution, but their bounded depth. But in his view, it’s not enough to study the ability of language to reveal reality, because it means only paying attention to the subject and the object, while ignoring other factors (Shpet, 1994, pp. 294-295).

German Husserlian phenomenology was booming, while ontological problems in Russian philosophy of language were embodied as an interpretation of the concepts of “words”, “symbols”, “myths”, “languages”, and “discourses”. It should be said that the development of the relationship between “cognition” and “consciousness”, and that between “ontological” and “epistemological” issues has narrowed the gap between phenomenology and traditional Russian philosophy of language. If we consider language spaces to be the foundation of ontology, they can then be fully regarded as the existence and a modern interpretation of the Sobornost concept. In that sense, the debate about the name of God would be transformed into a discussion of modernity, and its object is the language with ontological meaning. This is the hermeneutic turn of Shpet’s philosophy. It can be seen that the principle of “the unity of all things” is not only the fundamental source of Shpet’s philosophy of language but also an important historical premise of the establishment of hermeneutics in Russian philosophy.

Chapter 2

Shpet’s philosophy of language originated after the epistemological turn. Despite that, he upheld the Russian philosophical tradition, which has a strong sense of ontology, basing his study of Husserlian
phenomenology on that. Phenomenon and Meaning largely embodies his criticism and development of Husserlian phenomenology. As the first systematic study of Husserlian phenomenology in academe, it highlights the criticism and transformation of Husserl’s theory as well as introduces Husserlian phenomenology to Russian readers. On the one hand, Shpet tried to reconstruct Husserl’s research on “the act of consciousness” to “the object of consciousness” from the perspective of ontology based on the Neoplatonism of the Moscow school of metaphysics. On the other hand, he tried to improve Husserl’s analysis of the object of consciousness.

Husserlian phenomenology regards meaning as the conceptual grasp of intention, and it believes that the analysis and construction of intentionality is the main method to understand the internal cause of meaning. Therefore, the study of meaning cannot stay at the level of expression, but it must go deep into the level of consciousness, in order to reveal the internal mechanism of the formation of meaning, thus extending the concept of ‘meaning’ from the area of language to the whole field of consciousness. (Wang, 2001, p. 52)

Husserl saw consciousness as a “meaning” and “sense” field.

Regarding this issue, Husserl followed Platonism from ancient Greek and later the classical philosophical traditions subsequent to Descartes and Kant. On the contrary, Shpet focused on what was behind this philosophical branch, which means that there are differences between them in terms of phenomenological procedures and methods. Husserl wanted to establish philosophy as the fundamental science of consciousness, where cognition is the only form of research, but Shpet regarded philosophy as a transcendental ontology, where cognitive activities are just one of many forms. Contrary to Husserl, he paid more attention to the cognitive process itself and the structure of cognitive behavior, and he noticed the questions about the “object of consciousness” and “meaning” from the beginning, hence making the problem ontological. That is why Shpet proposed a question about the “meaning” of existence, which developed Husserl’s thought on an ontological level.

Shpet believed that Husserl’s philosophy inherited the empirical tradition, which is that philosophy as a basic science originates from fundamental differences between an object in the outside world and the sense of the object. If an object in the outside world is recognized by its appearance, then consciousness is directly recognized in its essence. In his view, “meaning” and “perceptual experience” are incomparable categories: “the meaning of science, especially its system, is not a type of perceptual experience, but a response to it; it is not an experience but criticism of experience”. This is different from Husserl, who was opposed to equating response and judgment (Kohal, 1978, p. 106).

The object of consciousness and the act of consciousness are two crucial concepts that Shpet used to interpret Husserlian phenomenology. He examined the appearance of the object and the object itself in a critical light. He pointed out that Husserl divided the intuition into two kinds—a priori and conceptual, which is not enough. In his view, the behavior of interpretation or the understanding of the “meaning” of the object itself is the basis of these two types of intuitions. Sociality exists in any cognition. While Husserl distinguished the “act of consciousness” and the “object of consciousness” (the phenomenon to which it points), his theory still has imperfections. In Husserl’s view, words cannot express the logical meaning from one object to another. Without the boundaries of individual consciousness as a communication tool, words immediately transform into the inner state of the speaker or the incidental marker of a behavior segment. In other words, the imperfections of Husserl’s theory lie in the fact that there is no question about “social being”, so it cannot reveal the essence of the phenomenon and things.
In Shpet’s view, transcendental and conceptual intuitions cannot sufficiently describe characteristics as well as potential and cognitive methods. Furthermore, social intuition is primary, and it can stimulate a priori and objective reality (Shpet, 1923, p. 96). Therefore, hermeneutic behavior is an interpretation of the content of the “object of consciousness” as a symbol of inner meaning. Thus, Shpet added a dimension based on the concept of “inner sense” to perfect the description of classical phenomenology. This new dimension captures the inner perception of things, meaning that he has filled the gap in Husserl’s analysis of the origin of cognition with hermeneutics.

Shpet did not regard hermeneutics as a theory parallel to phenomenology but as a part of phenomenology itself. He concluded long before Hans-Georg Gadamer: The reason of things cannot be known, but can only be understood. Therefore, the classical phenomenological approach should be supplemented by hermeneutics as a result of phenomenological analysis. In this sense, it is sensible that Shpet’s hermeneutic phenomenology is seen as heralding the similar concepts of Gadamer and Heidegger.

Shpet built his unique hermeneutics in the process of inheriting and surpassing Husserlian phenomenology. It can be said that the creative interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology and the unique prevision of its prospects are precisely the characteristics of Shpet’s philosophy of language. It is Shpet’s most significant contribution to Russian philosophy of language.

Chapter 3

Although, like the Russian school of linguistic ontology, Shpet was very concerned about the questions regarding “word” and its origin, the apparent difference between him and the former is that he also analyzed the epistemology of the “word.”

In *The Inner Form of Word*, Shpet discusses the relationship between language and thinking as well as the relationship between self-awareness and social environment of the subject. He pointed out that: “First look at the outside world. Every human behavior is performed in the inner world: feelings, willingness, thinking, decisions, behaviors, and language” (Shpet, 1978, p. 245). Moreover, he referred to Hegel’s view many times, which considers “spirit” as a specific type of noble origin. “Spirit” was understood in a more subjective context, indicating the inseparability and mutual decisiveness of spirit and language. Through an understanding of “language” and “spirit,” Shpet unified “object and subject”, “objective and subjective”, and “material and spiritual” philosophical issues in a dialectical process. In this way, Shpet accomplished the ingenious combination of phenomenology and Hegel’s dialectics. It can be concluded that this approach borrowed Solovyov’s method of criticizing “abstract realism”.

Hegel’s influence on Shpet is unquestionable, but there is a fundamental difference between them: Shpet pointed out that language is missing among the various spiritual phenomena carefully divided by Hegel, and it was Humboldt who filled this gap. He went on to believe that language is the objectification of spirit.

When analyzing the subject-object relationship, Shpet introduced the concepts of “subjectivization of object” and “objectification of subject”. The former refers to the objective reality and historical phenomenon of social culture. The latter means that the existence of the ideology of language, art, knowledge, and culture is not only the medium between nature and the new social and cultural fields, it has established but also a part of the

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3 This refers to its spiritual phenomenology.
world itself, that is, “social culture” (Shpet, 1978, p. 249). In Shpet’s theory, language is not seen as an expression of essence, but as essential existence.

As one of the first scholars in the Russian academic community who directly used the term “semiotics”, the about the word Shpet wrote in the History as a Subject-matter of Logic as follows:

History as science only recognizes a source of knowledge, which is the word. A word is a form in which a historian can find the real content of his or her academic frontier and conduct scientific research on it, and the word is a type of symbol from which a historian can move toward an object of the unique connotation that constitutes the meaning or sense of the symbol. (Shpet, 1915, p. 128)

Therefore, history as a science is related to words as symbols. Shpet further pointed out two directions in hermeneutics—one focuses on polysemy and the other on the monosemy of interpretation. He believes that they differ in their understanding of “sense”. In terms of the former, as a symbol subordinate to interpretation, words point to the objective relationship between the “things”, and their objects; for the latter, words only refer to the narrator’s intention, desire, and cognition, and the interpretation is free and arbitrary. The monosemy of understanding depends on context, and this is a symbol; if a symbol has two meanings then there are already two different symbols. Therefore, Shpet distinguished “meaning” and “sense”. He believed that the former is presented in the dictionary, which is uncertain and has multiple meanings; while the latter is related to the specific context and only has one meaning. This view was inherited by the Russian philosophy of language school in the late twentieth century.

In his study of Shpet, G. G. Pocheptsov (Г. Г. Почепцов) pointed out that words seem to be ambiguous before it is used to convey meaning or before we encounter it but still do not know what it means. As an interpretive task, interpreting the meaning of a word should refer not only to the so-called meaning but also to the use of various words (Pocheptsov, 2001, p. 182). Another of Shpet’s achievements in the philosophy of language is that he carefully examined “words” from the perspective of semiotics and provided a view of a “person in the field of semiotics”. As hermeneutics should lead to the uniqueness of communication, Shpet interpreted this process as a transition from polysemy to unitary meaning.

Another Russian linguist and philosopher, Alexander Potebnja (А. А. Потебня), also proposed the concept of the “internal form of the word” and analyzed it as the central category of its philosophy of language. However, Shpet later believed that Potebnja’s approach undermines this concept (Shpet, 2003, p. 54). The author believes that Shpet’s criticism of Potebnja is unfair, but his concept of the “internal form of the word” is indeed different from the former. The latter is based on the methodology of studying language in a psychological way, while the former opposed this practice and attempted to construct a philosophy of language that is free from psychology. According to Shpet’s theory, words are not material objects observed from the outside, but symbols that can only be understood through “rational intuition” for delivering social meaning. To achieve this, the symbols must be analyzed within the framework of “experience-expression-understanding”, and understanding must be interpretive.

Shpet’s hermeneutic-phenomenology concerns mainly pragmatic epistemological issues. In his theory, language is regarded as an essential existence, and the cognition of language is a spiritual experience. It can be said that it is the three-dimensional unification of the “language-essential existence-spiritual experience” that constitutes the epistemological foundation of Shpet’s hermeneutic-phenomenology.
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