

Gustav Shpet's Literary and Theatre Theory

Galin Tihanov  
*Manchester University*

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**Abstract:** In his paper, "Gustav Shpet's Literary and Theatre Theory," Galın Tihanov focuses on the literary and theatre theory of Gustav Shpet (1879-1937), Russia's foremost phenomenologist. Shpet's work on literary and theatre theory comes into view as a complex amalgam of innovation and regression. He foreshadowed important tenets of semiotics and structuralism while remaining critical of Russian formalism. At the same time, his knowledge of aesthetics and the philosophy of art, as well as his distrust of historical poetics, barred him from keeping pace with significant contemporary developments in literary theory. Moreover, his work remained in the end skeptical of the self-assertion of literary theory as an autonomous field of enquiry in the late 1910s and the early 1920s. Instead, Shpet preferred to see literary theory in the sanctuary of aesthetics, allied with a neo-Humboldtian philosophy of language. His interpretation of the novel points to his deeper roots in an artistic and philosophical tradition largely alien to the new departures in literature, art, and theory heralded and stimulated by the efforts of the avant-garde. This regressive entrenchment is even more salient in Shpet's theatre theory. Tihanov examines Shpet's contribution in intersecting areas and assesses his contribution to literary and theatre theory in 1920s Russian culture.

## Galin TIHANOV

### Gustav Shpet's Literary and Theatre Theory

Gustav Shpet (1879-1937) has emerged over the last few years as one of the most significant Russian philosophers of the two decades following World War I. The principle promoter of Husserlian phenomenology, at the same time creatively modifying Husserl and departing from him on some essential points, Shpet was also an early advocate of modern hermeneutics. He left behind seminal work spanning philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, literary and theatre studies, and the history of Russian thought. In this paper, I focus on Shpet's theoretical work on literature and theatre during the 1920s, assessing in the process the precarious balance between innovation and regression that marks his contribution. I do so by discussing in detail his involvement in the study of literature and theatre in the Moscow Linguistic Circle and at GAKhN: State Academy of Artistic Sciences, and by posing, subsequently, the question of his position within the larger field of theoretical enquiry in the 1920s. Examining Shpet's perspective in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's invites itself as a necessary step in answering this question.

The institutional centres of Shpet's work on literature (and to some extent also of his work on theatre) were the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the State Academy of Artistic Sciences. Assessing Shpet's theoretical concerns and his contribution should thus be embedded in a more detailed account of his involvement with these two institutions, whose fortunes became entwined after 1921. Shpet was elected a member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle on 14 March 1920, following his presentation of a paper entitled "Aesthetic Features in the Structure of the Word" ("Esteticheskie momenty v strukture slova"), in the discussion of which Osip Brik took part (Krusanov 461). Although Shpet attended only one more meeting of the Circle (on 4 April 1920), through his younger disciples he influenced its work in no small measure. In an article on the history of the Moscow Linguistic Circle written in November 1976 for *The Short Literary Encyclopaedia* (Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia), but only published twenty years later, Roman Jakobson noted that Shpet's phenomenology of language left "an evident mark on the evolution of the Circle in the concluding phase of its life" (Jakobson, "Moskovskii" 367); elsewhere, he praised Shpet's important role as an "outstanding philosopher of Husserl's school" (Jakobson, "Example" 534), whom Husserl himself considered "one of his most remarkable students" (Jakobson, "Retrospect" 713; Jakobson also recalled that Shpet had urged him to acquaint himself with the ideas of Anton Marty). After Jakobson's departure for Estonia and then Prague in 1920, Shpet's (and later, through him, GAKhN's) influence became gradually so overpowering that it eventually led to the split of the Circle in mid-1922 (Nikolaev 228). In the final stages of the Circle's existence, several younger members -- -- Boris Gornung, A.A. Buslaev, Nikolai Zhinkin -- joined GAKhN where Shpet was elected Vice-President in 1924; the library of the Circle was also transferred to GAKhN (Toman 66).

Shpet's impact on the work of the Moscow Linguistic Circle flowed above all from the publication of his *Aesthetic Fragments*, the three instalments of which proved of immense importance to a group of younger scholars and literati in the Circle and later at GAKhN. But his contributions to the work of the Circle were noted earlier than that. On 4 April 1920 Shpet participated in a most intriguing discussion on plot ['siuzhet'], where he and Petr Bogatyrev sided with Vinokur's insistence on the essentially verbal (*slovesnaia*) nature of plot, against Osip Brik's suggestion that in painting and sculpture plots of a non-verbal character are possible (Shapir 299-300). This discussion bears an early testimony to Shpet's belief in language as the provider of a universal semiotic code that enables the processes of translation and expression between different sign systems (literature, painting, sculpture etc.; Shpet advances this idea most comprehensively in his article "Literatura" which was drafted in the mid-1920s as an entry for GAKhN's *Dictionary of Artistic Terms* [Slovar' khudozhestvennykh terminov]). Finally, at a meeting of the Circle on 21 March 1922, it was proposed that Shpet be invited to become

a member of the editorial board of the linguistic section of the Circle's publishing house (in his capacity as a philosopher) -- an idea which, after long discussions, failed to gain approval amongst the membership (the planned publishing house did not materialise either; see Toddes and Chudakova 240-41). It is with the appearance of the *Aesthetic Fragments* (written in January-February 1922, published in 1922-23) that Shpet's influence on the Moscow Linguistic Circle became most visible. Of particular significance is the second instalment of the *Aesthetic Fragments*, where Shpet offered the first Russian definition of poetics as grammar: "Poetics in the broad sense *is the grammar of poetic language and poetic thought*" (Shpet, "Esteticheskie" 408; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine; emphasis in the original). This initially metaphorical use of "grammar" was later taken up by Roman Jakobson in the late 1950s and the early 1960s in his well-known programme for the study of the "Poetry of grammar and [the] grammar of poetry," where "grammar," purified from Shpet's reference to "poetic thought," evolved from a metaphor to a term with distinct scope and content. Significantly, in the same place Shpet also speaks for the first time of the "poetic" (rather than simply aesthetic) "function of the word," thus foreshadowing Jakobson's later authoritative emphasis on the poetic function of language.

The second significant contribution of Shpet in the *Aesthetic Fragments* is his definition of the structure of the word and its differentiation from the concept of system, the latter applied by Shpet mostly to discourse in its entirety (while the use of "structure" ['struktura'] vacillates between referring to isolated words or to whole sequences of words, the boundary between the two being blurred on occasion by the Russian *slovo*, standing as it does for both). Again in the second instalment, Shpet writes: "What is meant by 'structure' of the word is not the morphological, syntactic, or stylistic construction -- in short, not the arrangements of linguistic units 'on the plane' (*ploskostnoe*), but on the contrary -- the organic, depth-wise arrangement of the word, from the sensually conceivable [wording] to the formal-ideal (eidetic) object, at all levels of the relations located (*raspolagaiushchikhsia*) between these two terms. The structure is a concrete construction whose individual parts can vary in 'size' (*v razmere*) and even in quality, but not a single part of the whole *in potentia* can be removed without destroying this whole (Shpet, "Esteticheskie" 382). The system, on the other hand, is a set of structures where each structure preserves its own particularity. The biological organism -- Shpet's example -- is precisely such "a system of structures," where each structure (bones, nerves, blood vessels etc.) remains concrete and distinct. This differentiation between structure and system was welcomed by some linguists in the 1920s, notably by Viktor Vinogradov (265) who read into Shpet's argument a privileging of the notion of structure (depth) over that of system (horizontality), and -- by extension -- of the paradigmatic approach over the syntagmatic. In this context, one should refer to Shpet's awareness of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*. Shpet knew Saussure's text since about the end of June 1922 when he received the unpublished translation of the first part prepared by Aleksandr Romm, another member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle (see Toddes and Chudakova 235). He thus may have had the chance to revise certain passages of his *Aesthetic Fragments* before the installments were published in 1922-23 (although this must remain a speculation at this stage).

Finally, Shpet's *Aesthetic Fragments* should be credited with anticipating the trend of detecting in scientific discourse traces of figurativeness (and metaphoricity), a feature which brings the discourses of science and literature closer to one another than customarily thought. "Figurativeness (*obraznost*) is not only a trait of 'poetry'... but is a general property of language, which belongs to scientific discourse as well" (Shpet, "Esteticheskie" 443). This statement questioned Husserl's certainty that the discourse of science can be strictly differentiated from everyday discourse and offered an approach that -- although not pursued further by Shpet himself -- was revived in the 1970s and the 1980s in post-structuralism (more on this see in Steiner 343-58). But we can also see from this statement why Shpet was perceived as an outright enemy by the Petersburg Formalists (especially Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum) and as insufficiently radical by Jakobson. Despite the pioneering suggestion of a difference between the poetic and the aesthetic function of language, Shpet remained interested mainly in

the latter. He denied poetry -- and literature in general -- their special status as sole exponents of discursive figurativeness bestowed upon them by the Formalists. And although both in the *Aesthetic Fragments* and in the *Introduction to Ethnic Psychology* he opposed resolutely the psychological interpretation of the image (as practised by Potebnia), Shpet nonetheless sought to explain the image as hovering between the object and the idea; he endeavoured to clarify its relations to the inner form of the word, to its logical and ontological dimensions. Last but not least, he was also receptive to the subjective-biographical aspects of the literary work of art, singling out the importance of the authorial voice (Shpet, "Esteticheskie" 464-71). Ultimately -- and here lies the crucial difference between Shpet and the Formalists -- literature was for him not a self-sufficient system to be explained with reference to the specifically poetic function of language; literature for Shpet -- even when all his semiotic inclinations are taken into account -- is primarily just one of the spheres of creativity appropriated by what he calls "aesthetic consciousness." As a phenomenologist, Shpet's prime concern was to understand under what conditions an utterance becomes the object of aesthetic experience. This question is inextricably linked to the question of sense, so consistently ignored by the Formalists: "how should one express a given sense [smysl], so that its perception is an *aesthetic* one?" (Shpet, "Esteticheskie" 448; emphasis in the original). Equally, it presupposes attention to form in its necessary relation to *content*, as both the *Aesthetic Fragments* and Shpet's later article "Literatura" demonstrate (see Shpet, "Literatura" 253-59).

Small wonder, then, that the Formalists were hostile to Shpet's *Aesthetic Fragments* and the output of his younger followers in the Moscow Linguistic Circle and at GAKhN who were perceived as traitors of Formalism and of the original linguistic fundamentalism of the Moscow Circle. Eikhenbaum wrote on 30 June 1924 to Grigorii Vinokur -- who was very sympathetic to Shpet's ideas, reviewed favourably his *Aesthetic Fragments*, openly acknowledged his influence on his own work (Vinokur 106), and even tried (unsuccessfully) to urge Jakobson and Eikhenbaum to shed their reservations towards the philosopher -- that in the end he "doesn't believe" in Shpet, "it's [all] empty rhetoric" ("eto pustoe krasnorechie") (qtd. in Chudakova and Toddes 17). Shklovsky, too, preserved a highly sceptical and ironic attitude into the 1930s (see Tihanov, "Literature and Aesthetics"). Jakobson, while acknowledging, as we have seen, Shpet's role as a mediator between Husserlian phenomenology and the Moscow Linguistic Circle, thought Shpet insufficiently radical and incapable of embracing the non-negotiable principles of linguistic fundamentalism. The value of the *Aesthetic Fragments* is thus twofold. Firstly, despite the fact that on several counts Shpet presaged important developments in structuralism and semiotics, his book presented the philosophically most sophisticated (and earliest) substantive, if at times oblique, polemic with Formalism, preceding both Boris Engel'gardt's (1925) and Pavel Medvedev's (1928) later critiques. Secondly, and even more importantly, it offered a positive programme for the study of the verbal work of art from the positions of phenomenological aesthetics (Shpet's occasional departures from Husserl notwithstanding), cross-bred with hermeneutics. Here the concept of "inner form" is of particular significance. Formulated as early as 1917 in his essay "Mudrost' ili razum?" ("Wisdom or Reason?"), Shpet's crucial concept of "inner form" harked back to Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language. It was sharpened in Shpet's work on the history and the current state of hermeneutics (in "The Hermeneutics and Its Problems," completed in 1918) and then occupied centre stage in both the *Aesthetic Fragments* and the *Introduction to Ethnic Psychology*, not to mention Shpet's 1927 monograph specifically dedicated to the inner form of the word. "Inner form," conveying the notion of a deeper semantic stability and thus positing a horizon of reliable interpretation, was also an important theoretical instrument in the research of Shpet's younger colleagues at GAKhN. In 1923, Shpet gave at GAKhN a paper on "The concept of inner form in Wilhelm Humboldt," followed in 1924 by papers from Buslaev ("The Concept of Inner Form in Steinthal and Potebnia") and Kenigsberg ("The Concept of Inner Form in Anton Marty"). This direction was followed up in the collective GAKhN volume *Artistic Form* (Khudozhestvennaia forma) of 1927, where Shpet's disciples offered an exploration of form from the perspectives of aesthetics and semantics. Equidistant from both Marx-

ism and Formalism, the volume was ultimate proof of this younger generation of scholars having little time or regard for either, a position that no doubt put them, their teacher, and their institution, the State Academy of Artistic Sciences, in a very difficult position as Stalinism gradually tightened its grip on intellectual life. Finally, while discussing Shpet's work on aesthetics and literature in the 1920s, we also need to consider his extensive notes on the novel (1924), a document of his theoretical preoccupations that brings into sharp relief the differences between his and Mikhail Bakhtin's approaches. The notes, which remained unpublished until 2007, were perhaps part of Shpet's larger (also unpublished) work titled "Literaturovedenie," announced in 1925 as one of GAKhN's projects (see Tatiana Shchedrina's comments in Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 507).

Shpet relies very much on authors, notably Hegel, Erwin Rohde, and Georg [György] Lukács, who later feature prominently (explicitly or implicitly) in Bakhtin's discussion of the novel. He borrows from Hegel and Lukács, as does Bakhtin, the conceptual framework that juxtaposes epic and novel (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 57-58). But while Bakhtin overturns Lukács's scheme and emancipates the novel, transforming it from an underdog of literary history into a celebrated *écriture* that transcends the restrictions of a mere genre, Shpet abides by the old opposition and validates the role of the novel as a "negative" genre. For Shpet, the novel is marked by a string of fatal absences. It lacks "composition," "plan," and, most importantly, "inner form" (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 57). For Shpet "inner form" suggests, let us recall, a crucial evidence for the potential of art to produce serious, non-arbitrary versions of reality. The lack of "inner form" stands, more widely, for the lack of necessity and compelling direction in the work of art. The novel is thus no more than a "degradation" of the epic (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 63): the epic offers access to an *idea* (in Plato's sense), whereas the novel furnishes only *doxa* (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 66). The novel, with its arbitrary inventions, is the result of the disintegration of myth (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 84). It therefore has no "plot in the strict sense of the word," only a "theme" which deals not with the "construction of an idea" (what plot should really do), but simply with the "empirical commonality of the motif" (Shpet, *Iskusstvo*). Lagging behind not just the epic but also Greek tragedy, the novel knows no catastrophe, only irresolvable conflict, antinomy (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 67). In concord with his condescending evaluation of Russian philosophy, Shpet interprets the whole of Russian literature as a "novel," for there has been, allegedly, no sense of epic reality in it (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 79); even *War and Peace* is called not an epic but an ironic, and therefore, "romantic" novel, "romantic" being the damning label attached to any narrative permeated by arbitrariness. We thus begin to understand why in the *Aesthetic Fragments*, as well as in his notes on the novel, Shpet gestures towards the novel as a mere "rhetorical" form: the epic is about an "organic embodiment of the idea," the novel is all about "an analysis of opportunities" (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 81), about the multitude of equally valid free wills and the choices the individual faces after leaving the epic cosmos. The novel is not about *incarnatio*, it is only about *inventio* and *elocutio* (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 81), the skills involved in unfolding and charting the ephemeral and accidental private world of opportunities without conclusion, of journeys without destiny. It is against this background that Bakhtin's utter dissatisfaction with Shpet's denigration of the novel becomes clear. Bakhtin too, one would recall, began from the premise of negativity: the novel does not have a canon of its own; it is possessed of no constant features which generate the stability and cohesion marking most other genres. He reinterprets this negativity, however, into a forte: the novel knows no ossification, its energy of self-fashioning and re-invention is unlimited, its versatility accommodates and processes vast masses of previously submerged and neglected discourses. In brief, the novel is anything but a merely "rhetorical form" in the pejorative sense Shpet gives this term in the *Aesthetic Fragments*, in his notes on the novel, and in *The Inner Form of the Word* (see Bakhtin 268). For Shpet, the novel signals impasse; it holds no prospect: "When a genuine flourishing of art occurs, the novel has no future" (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 84). The novel, unlike poetry, is a genre for the masses, it corresponds to their "average moral aspirations" (Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 88). Bakhtin, by contrast, extolled the democratic charge of the novel and dreamt, as we know, of a literature colonized by the novelistic.

The comparison between Bakhtin's and Shpet's interpretations of the novel takes us to the very heart of the question about Shpet's position on the scene of literary theory in Russia during the 1920s, a time when impulses derived from the works of Russian theorists signaled innovation across the continent and led the way in establishing literary theory as a specific and autonomous field (and mode) of enquiry. The parallel with Bakhtin suggests that, despite a number of seminal advances, Shpet's intervention in the realm of literary theory was bound to be perceived by many of his contemporaries as somewhat jaded and perhaps belated. As a follower of Husserl and Humboldt, attempting a synthesis between phenomenology and hermeneutics, Shpet no doubt considered the Russian philosophical tradition to be lagging behind, deprived of adequate vocabulary, inarticulate, if not plain "dumb" (see the section "Neveglasiie" in Shpet, "Ocherk"). Yet when it comes to literary and theatre theory rather than philosophy, Shpet was judged by many as in turn lagging behind; his neo-Humboldtianism, against the background of the radicalism of the Russian Formalists, earned him the reputation of a thinker who makes a virtue of arriving on the intellectual scene late rather than never. Viktor Vinogradov reports that the young supporters of Formalism at the Leningrad Institute of Art History (Gosudarstvennyi Institut Istorii Iskusstv) displayed a banner with the words "Luchshe Shpet, chem nikogda" (literally, "better Shpet than never") to signal their sarcasm and distance from Shpet (see Vinogradov 265). The irony was not lost on those who knew that Shpet was a follower of German thought (see the German homophone *spät* [late] in the saying "besser spät als nie"). This sense of belatedness could be accounted for by taking recourse to Shpet's philosophical baggage and to the specific constellation of theoretical paradigms in the Soviet literary studies of the 1920s. Steeped in phenomenology and in a version of hermeneutics and philosophy of language that increasingly built on the work of nineteenth-century thinkers, foremost amongst them Humboldt and Lazarus, Shpet's views on literature (and also theatre) moved in the orbit of aesthetics, refusing to embrace the agenda of a formalist approach interested in literariness as the presumed intrinsic feature of the verbal work of art. Soviet literary theory in the 1920s was dominated by sociological, formalist, and psychoanalytic approaches, with some vestiges of a more traditional historical poetics and morphology of literature. Shpet's work did not fall into any of these paradigms; it was dictated clearly by philosophical concerns and, if anything, called for a return to aesthetics as the proper home of literary studies. Thus Shpet, along with his colleagues and disciples at GAKhN, appeared to swim against the current, denying literary theory the right to exist outside the realm of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. He was as if at pains to abort the imminent launch of modern literary theory as an autonomous discipline, attempting to steer it back to the fold of aesthetics and a neo-Humboldtian philosophy of language. These aspirations were seen by many of his contemporaries as regressive, conserving as they did a tradition of well-tempered philosophising about literature and the arts that was being ousted by the radicalism of Formalism (and, to a different effect, also by that of Marxism). Shpet's role, as we have established in the previous section, was to encourage a move away from Formalism and to address the central question of form from a phenomenological and hermeneutical perspective that swerved back to the question of content and the significance of the text for the reader. At the same time, we must heed the fact that Shpet's proposed de-radicalisation (or de-formalisation) of literary theory and its attending reincorporation into the realm of aesthetics and the philosophy of art was a process that evolved gradually in the course of the 1920s. In the *Aesthetic Fragments*, where this trend is already strong and results in an unmistakable polemic with the Formalists, Shpet, as we have seen, still foreshadows some important developments in structuralist literary theory and semiotics: he seeks to differentiate between the aesthetic and the poetic function of the word; he attempts to define structure and system and to draw distinctions between them; he also voices belief in language as a universal semiotic matrix that allows the conversion of different sign systems. It is only with *The Inner Form of the Word* (Vnutrenniaia forma slova) (1927) that these innovations finally seem thrown away and Shpet reverts to an understanding of literature that harks back to aesthetics and a philosophy of language and art shaped increasingly by nineteenth-century concerns (despite his effort to up-date these with

the help of Marty and others). In Shpet's work, to sum up, we witness the stirring mixture of innovation and regression that makes the stuff of intellectual history at its most attractive and challenging.

Mikhail Bakhtin emerges once again as a relevant point of reference at this juncture. In the early 1920s, Shpet's preference for discussing the verbal work of art in the framework of aesthetics parallels Bakhtin's interest in categories such as form, author, hero, and dialogue from the point of view of aesthetics rather than from a perspective grounded specifically in literary theory. In the latter half of the 1920s, however, Shpet continues to discuss literature in a fashion informed by, and committed to, aesthetics and a neo-Humboldtian philosophy of language, whereas Bakhtin's theoretical discourse gradually breaks away from aesthetics and evolves towards philosophy of culture. It is from this vantage point that Bakhtin addresses in the 1930s various aspects of genre theory and historical poetics, two areas which remained alien to Shpet, as his notes on the novel reveal. Throughout the 1930s, Bakhtin writes as a philosopher of culture rather than as a thinker drawing his agenda from aesthetics. His entire conceptual apparatus during that time stands under the auspicious sign of grand narratives about the inner dynamics of cultural evolution, of which the novel proves a confident and forceful agent (and epitome). If Shpet and Bakhtin do share some common ground it is their departure from literary theory as an autonomous and self-sufficient field -- and mode -- of enquiry: Shpet was preparing a move backwards to aesthetics, Bakhtin was setting out on a journey forward, to the ill-defined but enormously exciting terrain of cultural theory and the philosophy of cultural forms.

Shpet's literary theory thus comes into view, let us reiterate, as a complex amalgam of innovation and regression. He foreshadowed important tenets of semiotics and Structuralism while remaining critical of the Formalists. At the same time, his embeddedness in aesthetics and philosophy of art, as well as his distinct distrust of historical poetics (see his remark in Shpet, *Iskusstvo* 47), barred him from keeping pace with significant contemporary developments in literary theory. Moreover, his work remained in the end deeply sceptical of the self-assertion of literary theory in the late 1910s and the early 1920s, preferring instead the sanctuary of aesthetics and a neo-Humboldtian philosophy of language. His interpretation of the novel, as we have already suggested, points to his deeper roots in an artistic and philosophical tradition largely alien to the new departures in literature, art and theory heralded and stimulated by the efforts of the avant-garde. This regressive entrenchment is even more salient in Shpet's theatre theory. After the October Revolution, a Theatre Department (TEO: Teatral'nyi otdel) was established within the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) to regulate the work of theatres throughout the country. At its foundation in 1918, the Theatre Department consisted of four sections administering, supervising, and studying 1) theatre history; 2) the organisation and management of the existing theatres and circuses; 3) the repertoire; and 4) theatre pedagogy. A section dealing predominantly with questions of theory was later added but then dissolved before being re-established in 1921, when the writer and critic Andrei Belyi, the philosopher Fedor Stepun, and Shpet himself were appointed as its only members (Iufit 72). In discharging his duty of promoting the study of theatre theory and disseminating the results of such studies, Shpet published in 1921 a highly interesting and controversial short piece on the process of the differentiation of labour in the modern theatre (see Shpet, "Differentsiatsiia"). Historically, Shpet argued, the playwright and the actor were identical; the first step in the process of differentiation was the separation of the actor from the author. The next step meant that the author also lost the actual function of staging the play: the stage-director and the set designer were born. Finally, Shpet claims, the time has arrived for the role of interpreting the meaning of the play to be entrusted to an independent agent -- neither the author, nor the stage director, nor the actor should be entitled to impose their interpretations which are anyway often, quite naturally, in conflict with one another. The hermeneutic function, Shpet insists, is a difficult one; it requires a degree of specialisation, education and skills which neither the actor nor the stage director necessarily possess. Without a professional interpreter, the "intellectual sense of the play" ("razumnyi smysl p'esy"; Shpet, "Differentsiatsiia" 204) will be lost,



and the actors will try to compensate for it by emphasising instead the bodily techniques of the spectacle (Shpet, "Differentsiatsiia" 204).

Shpet's attention to the process of differentiation within the stage performance has been compared in the past (cf. Stakhorskii, ed. 218) to Tynianov's pronouncement in his article "Illustrations": "We live in the age of differentiation of activities" (Tynianov 318). This is rather surprising, given the fact that, unlike Tynianov, Shpet posited the process of differentiation as an instrument of revealing, to recall his expression, the "intellectual sense of the play." In addition to the controversial ideological implications of this insistence on a single interpreter and, by extension, a single correct interpretation, there is here also a hint of scepticism towards avant-garde theatre (see the protest against emphasising the bodily techniques of the spectacle), not inconsistent with Shpet's only slightly later attack on Futurism and the avant-garde in his *Aesthetic Fragments*. Shpet's reservations towards the theatre of the avant-garde became much more prominent in his main contribution to theatre theory, the article "Theatre as Art," completed in September 1922. Published in December of the same year in an issue dedicated to the eighth anniversary of the Chamber Theatre and preceded there by an article by Tairov, Shpet's piece was an uneasy attempt at a compromise between, but also a simultaneous critique of, the two wings of avant-garde theatre theory. He distanced himself from Tairov's insistence that theatre be regarded as completely detached from the task of dialectically comprehending the world that exists outside art (see Schmid 112); at the same time, Shpet also sought to resist the demand that theatre and life be completely fused. The very title of Shpet's article, "Theatre as art," signalled his insistence on theatre being and remaining art, *pace* all activist aspirations (regardless of their political provenance) seeking to blend life and art (see Evreinov; Vsevolodskii-Gerngross). In the same article, Shpet criticised Wagner's thesis of the synthetic nature of theatre (Shpet, "Teatr" 112), which later theorists had taken up and solidified into one of the corner-stones of avant-garde performance practice. (Tairov, as is well known, wanted to rename his Chamber Theatre "Sinteticheskii teatr," an idea flying in the face of Shpet's theoretical platform.) Liubov' Gurevich, who, to the best of my knowledge, was the only one of Shpet's contemporaries to comment on his writings on theatre theory, noted that he, rather than following Wagner and the avant-garde, was still the captive of Diderot's "paradoxe sur le comédien" (Gurevich stressed that in *Zapiski rezhissera* (1921) Tairov, unlike Shpet, had rejected Diderot's theses; see Gurevich 22-23). Importantly, Shpet's position against the synthesis of the different arts, which also reverberates strongly in his *Aesthetic Fragments*, was waging wars on more than one front. It was attacking not only the avant-garde, but also, obliquely, the religious notion of theatre as an extension and modification of the church ritual, an approach made available, before Shpet entered the scene of theatre theory, by Pavel Florenskii ("Khramovoe deistvo kak sintez iskusstv"). In the end, when it comes to theatre theory, Shpet's career was marked by a tormenting discrepancy: when he wrote on theatre (the very early 1920s), he didn't do any work for the theatre; when, in the 1930s, he began working for the stage (both as a translator and as advisor), he had stopped writing on theatre. Thus the two streams – writing on theatre and working for the theatre -- were never brought together in his career.

A salient paradox in Shpet's theatre affiliations -- not so surprising when his theoretical stance is taken into account -- was also the fact that while he maintained close contacts with two of the greatest innovators in the history of Russian theatre, Aleksandr Tairov and Meyerhold, he never got involved in an avant-garde theatre production. On the contrary, when Meyerhold decided to stage Alexandre Dumas' *The Lady of the Camellias* (premiered on 19 March 1934), Shpet not only took on the translation (Zinaida Raikh -- Meyerhold's wife -- and Mikhail Tsarev were listed in the programme notes as Shpet's co-translators; see Sitkovetskaia 55), but he steered actively the rehearsals as well, achieving, according to one of the actors, a "miracle": Meyerhold, the inveterate theatre experimenter, staged the play in a realistic spirit (Mitiushin 89). Meyerhold did insert a few short texts that were not part of the original, and he also reshaped some others to give them a modern feel (Sitkovetskaia 55), but on the whole the play was done in a way that put historical verisimilitude first.

In conclusion, knowledge of Shpet's literary and theatre theory enables us to appreciate the multifarious texture of his intellectual life, particularly in the 1920s, a stage in his career increasingly marked by diversity under duress. The propitious volatility of the first post-revolutionary decade, still tolerant and conducive to creativity, was about to be supplanted by a climate of ideological control and suppression, the brutality of which could not fail to leave its stamp on Shpet's later fortunes and his eventual catastrophe. The last -- and at the same time most pronounced and most persistent -- Westerniser in the history of twentieth-century Russian thought was to be relegated in the 1930s to an increasingly marginal and unfulfilling existence. Rejecting the props of both Marxism and Russian religious philosophy, Shpet was weathering the storms of history alone, facing his impending end with consummate dignity. Shpet's membership of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and his leading role in the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN) put him, as we have seen, at the forefront of the polemics surrounding the Formal method. His *Aesthetic Fragments* afford a unique insight into the dynamics of Russian and European aesthetics and literary theory at the time, and a better understanding of the switch from Formalism back to philosophical aesthetics that a group of younger scholars, inspired by Shpet, endeavoured to accomplish in the mid-1920s. Shpet's theoretical work on literature and theatre exhibits, as we have established, a complex equilibrium between innovation and regression. His move backwards to aesthetics and to a neo-Humboldtian philosophy of language presuming the wholesome presence of a stable and truthful "inner form" flew in the face of the new radical developments in literary theory that began with the Russian Formalists. At the same time, he anticipated some of the tenets of Structuralism and semiotics. What still holds potential today seems to be his astounding intuition in extending the figurativeness and metaphoricality of the text beyond the sphere of literature and onto a whole range of other discourses (the scientific, the everyday, etc.), a gesture which, however fleeting and isolated in his own work, takes him past Formalism and Structuralism. It makes him our contemporary at a time when salvaging most of his other theoretical propositions might well be a task solely for the archivist.

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Author's profile: Galin Tihanov is teaches comparative literature and intellectual history at the University of Manchester where he also serves as co-director of the Research Institute for Cosmopolitan Cultures. His recent publications include *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (2000) and he co-edited volumes on Bakhtin (2000), the Bakhtin Circle (2004), and on Robert Musil (2007), as well as numerous articles on German, Russian, Central and East European intellectual and cultural history, and on various issues in comparative literature. Tihanov chairs the Committee on Literary Theory of the International Comparative Literature Association and he is member of the editorial board of *Comparative Critical Studies* and of the advisory board of *Primerjalna književnost*. His forthcoming publications include a co-edited *History of Soviet Literary Theory and Criticism* (with E. Dobrenko) and a volume on critical theory in Russia and the West (co-edited with A. Renfrew). He is currently completing a book on the uses of the Romantic tradition in twentieth-century German culture and thought. E-mail: <[galin.tihanov@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:galin.tihanov@manchester.ac.uk)>