

Gustav Shpet's Influence on Psychology

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Gustav Gustavovich Shpet is re-emerging as a major figure in twentieth-century intellectual history. As the person who introduced Russia to phenomenology, he has had a powerful impact on a wide range of intellectual debates in Russia and beyond. This impact, however, was ignored or consciously downplayed in the USSR. Starting in the 1930s, Shpet became largely invisible in official Soviet scholarly discourse, a tendency that was only exacerbated during the decades after his execution in 1937. This tendency is one of the factors that contributed to Shpet's being so little known in the West today.

In this article, we trace some of the lines of influence that Shpet had on psychology, a discipline that has usually not been closely associated with his name. It turns out that his impact on this discipline in the USSR was considerable. We pay particular attention in this regard to Shpet's impact on Lev Semenovich Vygotskii, a Russian psychologist whose ideas have come to widespread use throughout the world today. As will become apparent, however, the story of Shpet's influence on Russian psychology extends well beyond Vygotskii. When considering the fate of psychology in Russia, as well as on the worldwide scene today, one cannot help but recall Dostoevsky's comment after his staged execution (the pardon arriving at the last moment). At that moment in his life he wrote his brother Mikhail that "The dialectic has ended and life has begun." After October 1917, there is a sense in which life in academic disciplines like psychology in Russia ended and a dialectic began that has dragged on to our time. One of the most striking and impressive facts about the aftermath of the October Revolution, however, is that many Russian scholars managed to carry out their work despite tyranny and ideological censorship. In order to understand how this took place, it is essential to understand more about those lines of influence that tied figures like Shpet to other scholars.

The fate of Shpet, like that of so many other Soviet scholars, was horrendous. On several occasions he was dismissed from research and teaching positions. In 1935 he was arrested and sent to Eniseisk. In 1937 he was arrested again and an NKVD *troika* sentenced him to ten years in prison without the right to correspond with anyone. Later that same year he was re-arrested, tried again, and shot. In the criminal

code of the 1930s, execution by shooting was called the "highest measure of social defense." According to this logic the executioner apparently was what one might call a "social worker." In 1956 the rehabilitation of Shpet began, but in certain—intellectual—respects it continues to this day. Shpet's scholarly life was varied, intense, and extremely productive. He published a great deal. However, there is almost a total absence of recognition or response on the part of his contemporaries working on topics such as art, aesthetics, psychology, consciousness, meaning, language, and thinking. In actuality, Shpet's circles of contact and influence were extensive. He was friends with Tairov and Alisa Koonen; Anna Akhmatova met Shpet and Boris Pil'naiak in the company of the Lithuanian poet Yurgis Baltrushaitis and the composer Sergei Prokofiev. Shpet himself wrote about his acquaintance with the poets Andrei Belyi, Mikhail Kuzmin, Boris Pasternak, and Pavel Antokol'skii. In recalling his contact with Shpet, Andrei Belyi wrote:

It was never possible to decide whether [Shpet] was joking or serious. In an academic setting, Academician Shpet was usually the same, but when dining he was a completely different person. Sometimes we thought that the second was a clever reconnaissance party for the first, and sometimes we thought the opposite. For Shpet, launching a formal attack on you constituted a friendly attempt to lead you from a formal meeting to an intimate discussion. None of the philosophers befriended us as he did, and no one held himself off from us so warily when making academic presentations (274).

Shpet's tact and delicacy, which he displayed in connection with people of the arts, were apparently not very characteristic of his performance when interacting with colleagues, where he was at times merciless in his criticism.

In one way or another the problem of not knowing about Shpet, or knowing too little about his work, is only now beginning to be alleviated in psychology and more generally in the human sciences. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, this was not an issue. Shpet was much better known than Bakhtin, Vygotskii, or Rubinshtein. This is to say nothing of the younger A.N. Leont'ev and A.R. Luriiia. His status as a major thinker in psychology began to be publicly recognized at the end of the Soviet period. For example, in 1988, in an article on "Shpet and his Place in the History of Psychology in our Country," A.A. Mitiushin wrote that Shpet "was a leading figure in the history of Russian science and philosophy. In the first three decades of our century he was one of the most noteworthy figures in the cultural life of Russia" (23). All this raises questions about Shpet's influence on psychology in Russia and how this influence seems to have disappeared so thoroughly. As preliminary hypotheses for his apparent disappearance from the scene, we ask: Might it be due to the fact that he was too well known during his own lifetime? Or is it the case that "the perpetual absence in our efforts of generally organized scientific work is a sign of our great cultural backwardness (*nekul'turnosti*)!" (Shpet, "Ocherk" 11).

Perhaps it is time to follow Shpet's advice to attend to our past in a serious and culturally sophisticated way. We of course realize that the problem of knowing who cites whom and for what reason is a complex one, and not only in repressed and censored scholarship. In this connection, it is worth noting the almost total absence of mutual citations among figures such as Bakhtin, Vygotskii, and the physiologist of motor control N.A. Bernshtein. They all seemed to be surprisingly unfamiliar with one another, despite the fact that they actually were well acquainted. It is also strange that there are no traces of the participation of Bakhtin, Bernshtein, and Vygotskii in the work of GAKhN, despite the fact that they were all deeply concerned with issues of art. In Vygotsky's case there is only a single purely formal citation in *Psikhologiya iskusstva* (*The Psychology of Art*) to an article of Shpet's on aesthetics. *Psikhologiya iskusstva* is an early work by Vygotsky, most of which, apparently, was written before the publication of Shpet's *Aesthetic Fragments*, which first appeared in 1922-23. Unlike it, Vygotskii's *Thought and Language* was first published in 1934, a little over a decade after Shpet's *Aesthetic Fragments* appeared and several years after the appearance of his *Vnutrenniaia Forma Slova. Etiudy i variatsii na temy Gumbol'ta* (*The Inner Form of the Word: Études and Variations on Humboldt's Themes*), which appeared in 1927. The problems explored in all three of these remarkable books are similar. Their overlapping concerns are reflected in the fact that they share key terms such as *culture, history, consciousness, thinking, thought, word, action, image, sign, meaning, sense, inner speech, element, unit of analysis, and experience*. An exception to this pattern arises in connection with the concept of the inner form of the word. From the perspective of timing and influence, it is noteworthy that already in his 1917 article, "Mudrost' ili razum?" ("Wisdom or Reason?"), Shpet had outlined a diverse set of forms belonging to the word. These included grammatical, stylistic, aesthetic and logical forms: "What is important to us is that these are not accidental and empirical forms, but essential and necessary, so they are stable and self-identical, just as an object is identical with itself in its formation. In an analogy with Humboldt's 'inner form of language,' these are logical, and I term them ideal inner forms of language" ("Mudrost'" 294-95).

It is striking that Vygotsky generally did not use the concept of the inner form of the word, even in places where it would seem appropriate or necessary, for example, when reviewing the ideas of Humboldt and Potebnia. In outlining their views in "The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions," Vygotsky, as it were, renamed the inner form of the word as "meaning" and "inner image" and spoke of "inner comparison, inner picture or pictogram, conditional sounds connected with the inner image." (Vygotskii, "Istoriia razvitiia" 171). In *Thought and Language*, Vygotskii wrote of the "inner side of the word," that is, meaning, arguing that "there has been very little research on this aspect of the word" (Vygotsky, *Collected* 47). But in fact the inner form of the word had already been specially outlined in detail by Shpet in 1922. It is possible to read into Vygotskii's treatment of the inner side of the word ideas that Shpet had outlined regarding what he termed "the inner form." Indeed, Zinchenko did exactly this in publications connected with the centenary of

Vygotsky's birth (see Zinchenko, "Ot klassicheskoi"). Another major figure in Soviet psychology and philosophy, S.L. Rubinshtein, also did not go deeply into the inner side of the word. He spoke of the word as a unit of meaning and as a sign. True, he noted that "the external form of the word goes beyond the boundaries of the sign because the word has inner meaning. The meaning of a word is its semantic content which involves a generalized reflection of the object" (Rubinshtein 444-45).

It appears that Vygotskii did not so much supplement Shpet's ideas about the inner form of the word as he replaced them with the notion of the "inner plane of speech." In this connection, he argued that speaking requires the transformation from an inner plane to an external one, and understanding presupposes the reverse movement—from the external plane of speech to an internal plane. In our view, if Vygotskii had employed the full range and depth of Shpet's ideas about the inner form of the word in his account of inner speech and comprehension, he could have formulated things in a richer way. Perhaps it is even less surprising that Vygotskii's student, A.N. Leont'ev, a figure who went on to be a major shaping force in Soviet psychology, ignored Shpet's profound meditations on meaning and sense. The psychological theory of consciousness outlined by Leont'ev, in which these concepts play a central role, is quite hermeneutic in general intent, but it is short on specifics. For example, Leont'ev's writings are significantly less concrete in this area than were Vygotskii's. Leont'ev also managed not to notice Bakhtin and his ideas on dialogism and the polyphony of consciousness.

It is impossible to imagine how the ideas in Shpet's book, *Appearance and Sense*, could have not been known to Bakhtin, Vygotskii, and Leont'ev (the latter two, after all, had attended lectures and seminars by Shpet at Moscow University). This is especially so since these three authors repeatedly cited Husserl. What this suggests, then, is that consciously or unconsciously, Vygotsky began a tradition in psychology of ignoring Shpet, a tradition that was preserved by P.P. Blonskii, L.M. Vekker, P.Ia. Gal'perin, V.V. Davydov, A.N. Leont'ev, A.A. Leont'ev, B.F. Lomov, A.R. Luriiia, Ia.A. Ponomarev, S.L. Rubinshtein, A.A. Smirnov, A.N. Sokolov, and G.P. Shchedrovitskii. This also applies to many others who studied language, thinking, understanding, sense, and meaning. One almost never encounters references to Shpet, even in the writings of his own student, N.I. Zhinkin, who dedicated his life to studying the mechanisms of speech. This is true despite the fact that in lectures and discussion Zhinkin did speak a great deal about Shpet.

Before going into more detail on whether and how Shpet's ideas influenced others in Russia, it is worthwhile considering some frequently encountered explanations for why this influence appears not to exist. One line of reasoning behind the tradition of ignoring Shpet is that although he was a superior analyst and a still better critic, he actually produced very little by way of original work. This totally unfounded legend, the origins of which can be traced to Valentin Asmus and Vasilii Zen'kovskii, was supported indirectly by justified references to the difficulty in understanding Shpet's texts: "Shpet's exposition is characterized by the extremely abstract manner in which he set out his position in *Esteticheskie Fragmenty* (in a

style that somewhat shocked the reader): *exempla sunt idiosa*" (Ivanov 682). Although he made brilliant use of the Russian language, it is true that Shpet wrote in a way that is difficult to understand. He consciously avoided examples, considering it more important for the reader to apply something than to develop abstract notions on the basis of illustrations. Perhaps he overestimated his readership, believing them to be capable themselves of finding examples that could illustrate one or another difficult point in his thought. In short, the subject of Shpet's thinking is not simple. In this connection it is worth remembering that he worked with Husserl for some time. After such collaboration, it is not possible to expect simplicity.

The dearth of Shpet's apparent influence in Soviet psychology is particularly striking, given the extent to which he participated in the discipline's theoretical debates and organizational efforts. As early as 1912 he weighed in with his vision of the shape the discipline might take in the future. On the eve of the opening of the Psychological Institute in that year, he wrote an article titled "One Path of Psychology and Where It Leads." In this article he clearly identified himself as a psychologist. Furthermore, Shpet was deeply involved in the formation of organizations devoted to psychology. For example: "In December of 1920 an Office for Ethnic and Social Psychology was created at Moscow State University on the initiative of G.G. Shpet. N.I. Zhinkin was selected as its secretary. The organization of this office was preceded by Shpet's historical and critical research in the area of 'folk psychology' and his sharp critical analysis of Wundt's conceptual system. The theoretical principles and foundations formulated by Shpet preserve their unquestioned significance even today" (Mitiushin 37). This is not to say that Shpet always identified himself with the discipline of psychology; in keeping with his reputation for being a forceful, indeed scorching critic, he sometimes approached it from a perspective that was not appreciated. In fact, in some publications Shpet wrote as an "anti-psychologist," sharply critical of "psychological naturalism" (Shpet, "Teatr" 420-21).

One key to understanding the dual position Shpet articulated in these debates on the significance of psychology is to keep in mind that throughout the entire history of twentieth-century psychology it was fashionable to reflect on the discipline by identifying some crisis that it was supposedly undergoing at the moment. This crisis was felt by many, but different parties saw it in their own way. For example, in his renowned work "Istoricheskii smysl psikhologiskogo krizisa" ("The Historical Significance of the Crisis in Psychology"), Vygotskii characterized the psychology he knew in a wholly uncomplimentary light. Looking back, one is staggered by the obvious incongruity between this formulation and the facts at the time. In 1927, in addition to Vygotsky and his emerging school of followers (e.g., Luriiia, Leont'ev), scholars in pedagogy and psychotechnics were in full stride; members of the Bakhtin Circle were making contributions; and A.A. Ukhtomskii and N.A. Bernshtein who created the foundations of the physiology of activation (psychological physiology) were hard at work. We also have to mention A.A. Smirnov, B.M. Teplov, N.D. Levitov, P.A. Shevarev, and others who had comprised the Chelpanov Circle. And in the West, Gestalt psychology and other schools of thought were working at full strength

with new names appearing all the time, names such as Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Edward Tolman, and Frederic Bartlett. In reality all this hardly suggested a crisis. Instead it was a flowering of psychology that any period could envy. In the end, however, what came to transpire in science, including psychology, in the Soviet Union probably should be referred to by some term stronger than "crisis." Instead of crises of the sort one would normally expect in scientific evolution, Soviet science experienced a series of catastrophes. Vygotskii seems to have sensed the impending fate of his own work, and as a result he did not feel it necessary to publish his essay on the crisis in psychology during his lifetime (indeed, it was almost half a century after his death in 1934 that this paper appeared in the Russian edition of Vygotskii's writings).

When trying to understand the impact of various thinkers on Soviet psychology, we would argue that the self-definition of the individuals involved does not always provide the most useful insight. This applies to figures such as Bakhtin, Bernshtein, and Ukhtomskii, and also to Shpet. These names are not always mentioned in accounts of Soviet psychology, but without them, it is difficult to imagine the discipline taking the shape it did. Indeed, the first three never even called themselves psychologists. They never expressed a desire to be so labelled. As for Shpet, while it is obvious that he belonged and contributed to many disciplines, he did have a clear affiliation with psychology, at least during the early stages of his professional life. After starting off in this discipline, he went beyond its boundaries to consider issues of culture, philosophy, linguistics, aesthetics, and theater. But despite all his various inclinations, we would argue that he could not stop being a psychologist. He was already shaped by this discipline, and perhaps even against his will did a great deal for it.

Vygotskii's fate took him down a somewhat different path. It was only late in his career that he identified himself as member of the discipline of psychology, coming to it from his study of culture. He did indeed bring a wealth of knowledge about culture to his studies in this discipline, thereby giving rise to the "Cultural-Historical School of Psychology," a term that, incidentally, emerged only after his death. Fundamental to Vygotskii's formulation of human consciousness is the claim that language and other cultural tools play a fundamental role in shaping it. This theme of "mediation" (Wertsch, *Vygotsky; Voices*) runs throughout his writings, and was so central that near the end of his life he stated that "the central fact about our psychology is the fact of mediation" (Vygotskii, "Zapis" 166). In developing his ideas about semiotic mediation, Vygotsky identified two main "semiotic potentials" (Wertsch, *Vygotsky; Voices*) in language that can be exploited in the formation of human mental functioning. He was concerned in part with the potential that language has for serving as a tool for abstract reflection, a concern that led him to study forms of conceptual reasoning that he viewed as developing, both in sociocultural history and in ontogenesis.

In much of his writing, Vygotskii celebrated this form of reasoning as the key to "higher" (i.e., uniquely human) mental functioning. But Vygotsky revealed some

ambivalence about the power and prospects of Enlightenment rationality, at least as a sole formulation of human consciousness (Wertsch, "Vygotsky's Two Minds"), and in this connection he recognized another form of mental life. The key to his line of reasoning on this issue is the second semiotic potential he saw in language, namely the potential for linguistic signs to derive significance from context, including linguistic context, as opposed to abstract, decontextualized reflection. The form of mental functioning associated with this potential is something like a language-mediated stream of consciousness. It is in connection with this second semiotic potential that Vygotskii's debt to Shpet is particularly apparent. One concrete connection between Shpet and Vygotskii in this context can be seen in their discussions of meaning (*znachenie*) and sense (*smysl*). Instead of harnessing Shpet's ideas when dealing with these notions, Vygotskii cited the French psychologist Frederick Paulham (1856-1931), whose ideas are significantly less well developed than those outlined by Shpet in "Germenevtika i ee problemy" ("Hermeneutics and Its Problems"), which he completed in 1918. Nonetheless, the parallels between Shpet and Vygotsky are striking.

In Shpet's account meaning is a polysemous collection of significance that is fixed in dictionaries. In contrast, sense is a form of signification that emerges only in a concrete speaking context:

The word seems polysemous only as long as it is not used in meaningful communication or when we encounter it and do not yet know what meaning it has in communication. One might think, however, that sometimes the use of one and the same word for accomplishing two or more goals of signification may be a part of intention. It is obvious, however, that uncovering these goals involves the analysis not of meaning but of an author's intention, an author who might have his own rhetorical form (allegory, personification, parables and so forth). In order to understand the use of words' meanings as tasks of interpretation, therefore, one must have in mind not only meaning as such. One must also attend to the multiple forms of using a word and the psychology of using it. (Shpet, "Germenevtika" 226)

Vygotsky arrived at a formulation of the distinction between meaning and sense that has many striking parallels with Shpet's account, despite the fact that Vygotskii made no mention of Shpet or his ideas. Specifically, in chapter 7 of *Thought and Language*, Vygotskii wrote: "A word's sense is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word. Sense is a dynamic, fluid, and complex formation which has several zones that vary in their stability. . . . In different contexts, a word's sense changes. In contrast, meaning is a comparatively fixed and stable point, one that remains constant with all the changes of the word's sense that are associated with its use in various contexts. . . . The actual meaning of a word is inconstant. In one operation the word emerges with one meaning; in another, another is acquired" (*Collected* 275-76).

The parallels between Vygotskii's and Shpet's discussions extend well beyond their formulations of particular terms or distinctions such as those between mean-

ing and sense. Indeed, focusing too heavily on parallels in terminology can lead to overlooking a more general and more important way in which Shpet influenced Vygotskii. This has to do with the general formulations the two employed when dealing with language and thought.

Vygotsky wrote, or rather dictated, chapter 7 of *Thought and Language* as he was dying of tuberculosis. The chapter entitled "Thought and Word" is the text where Shpet's influence is probably more apparent than anywhere else in his writings. The two terms in the title of this chapter reflect a formulation that is reminiscent of Shpet's on several counts. Specifically, *thought* and *word* reflect an opposition that Vygotskii saw as operating between the two potentials around which his writings on semiotically mediated mental functioning are organized. *Word* is a cover term for the potential that language has for the kind of explicit, expanded, systemically organized meaning and form outlined in his account of conceptual development. *Thought*, by contrast, is a cover term Vygotskii used in this chapter for the potential language has for "abbreviation" and for contextualized signification.

Throughout chapter 7 Vygotskii examined these two general semiotic potentials in terms of several other more specific oppositions. For example, he outlined a distinction between the *internal* and *external* form of the word, between social and inner speech (with *egocentric speech* serving as a link between the two), between written speech and inner speech and between sense and meaning. In all these cases Vygotskii stressed that the two members of the opposition were quite distinct with regard to form as well as function. In general, he took *language*, *social speech*, *written speech*, the *phonetic* or *auditory* aspect of speech, the *grammatical* categories of subject and predicate, and *meaning* to be associated with explicit, systemically organized, social, expanded form, whereas *thought*, *inner speech*, the *semantic* aspect of speech, the *psychological* categories of subject and predicate, and *sense* were viewed as being characterized by implicit, condensed and highly contextualized and abbreviated form and personal sense. In Vygotskii's view, the externality associated with the first set of terms is tied to the fact that they are concerned with the social, and hence public sphere, whereas the internality of the second set of terms is tied to the fact that they are concerned with a private, psychological world: "Inner speech is for oneself. External speech is speech for others" (Vygotsky, *Collected* 257).

Vygotskii framed the general line of reasoning he would employ in chapter 7 in terms of an opposition between "two planes of speech . . . the inner, meaningful, semantic aspect . . . [and] its external, auditory aspect" (Vygotsky, *Collected* 250). Of course, some distinction between material sign and meaning is a commonplace in linguistic and semiotic analysis, but Vygotskii's formulation in this chapter goes beyond this general observation and echoes a more concrete line of reasoning employed by Shpet. Specifically, Vygotskii laid out his argument in terms of an opposition between the unarticulated intentions and motives of a speaker, on the one hand, and the discrete articulation and organization imposed by language, on the other. The dialectic that emerges between these two poles of opposition is a defining property of

human consciousness in his view and was what led Vygotskii to emphasize that this relationship, mediated by inner speech, is one of emergence rather than stasis.

Several elements of this line of reasoning appear to come straight out of Shpet's writings. Shpet warned that "We must look at language not as a dead product of a generative process [*ein Erzeugtes*], but instead as a generative process [*eine Erzeugung*]" (Shpet, "Vnutrenniaia" 55), and this is a central tenet of the argument he lays out in *Vnutrenniaia forma slova*. He repeated this assertion at several points in his review of Humboldt's position that language must be viewed as *energeia* and not as *ergon*: "For Humboldt it was a major revelation that language is *energeia*. For him everything comes down to this. All the other nuances in the description of this term must be understood in this sense: language is 'activity of the spirit' and 'the immanent work of the soul.' It is at the foundation of the very nature of being human . . . Language can be examined not only as substance, but as subject, not only as a thing, product or result of production, but as production process, as *energeia*" (Shpet, "Vnutrenniaia" 77-78). The extent to which this formulation of the problem is echoed in Vygotsky's writings is apparent in the way he mapped the task of chapter 7 of *Thought and Language*: "This central idea—a concept we will develop and clarify in the following discussion—can be expressed in the following general formula: The relationship of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a movement from thought to word and from word to thought. Psychological analysis indicates that this relationship is a developing process which changes as it passes through a series of stages . . . The movement of thinking from thought to word is a developmental process" (Vygotsky, *Collected* 250). This general formulation is something that Vygotsky outlined briefly in this chapter, but in our view he did not develop or utilize it to the level of sophistication that can be found in Shpet's writings. Rather, it seems that Vygotsky used it to establish the outlines for a set of arguments he wanted to make about a range of theoretical and empirical studies he had done.

As noted earlier, it is notoriously difficult to identify, let alone fully understand the intellectual influence of one thinker on another. In the case of Gustav Shpet, this is made all the more difficult because scholars from a range of disciplines in the Soviet Union seemed intent on forgetting him, at least in public discussion. However effective the tradition of ignoring Shpet may have been on the surface, it is becoming increasingly apparent that he had a deep influence on many areas of scholarship in Soviet Russia, and that influence continues today.

In seeking to outline Shpet's influence on psychology, a discipline that is often not closely associated with his name, we have been able to do little more than mention how this influence played out in general and give a bit more detail concerning one major figure, Lev Semenovich Vygotskii. In addition to being found in the latter's use of specific terms such as *meaning* and *sense*, Shpet's influence is to be seen in the general formulation of Vygotskii's line of reasoning about the relationship between language and thought.

What we have laid out is no more than a preliminary effort to identify and examine the ways in which Shpet influenced thinking in psychology as well as many

other disciplines, both in the Soviet context and elsewhere. Because of Shpet's tragic, but all too common fate in the Soviet Union, it is impossible to know how his impact on a range of disciplines in the human sciences might have evolved had he lived. With the new possibilities presented to us in the post-Soviet era to appreciate the power and significance of his ideas; however, it has already become apparent that we have much more work ahead of us to understand the powerful impact of this amazing intellect.

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