ELIZABETH DURST

GUSTAV SHPET

As Director of the Philosophical Department and then Vice-President of RAKhN, Gustav Gustavovich Shpet (1879-1940) devoted a greater part of his professional career to the intellectual welfare of the Academy (Figs. 3, 5, 19, 20). In the Philosophical Department, he examined processes of esthetic perception and artistic production, devising philosophical tenets intended to serve as broad bases for the study of the arts. Shpet was opposed to using ideology as mere philosophy and his subsequent refusal to accept Marxism as a single philosophical framework for esthetics left him — and RAKhN a a whole — especially vulnerable to official censure. Indeed, when RAKhN was purged in 1929-30, Shpet was criticized for his reactionary "idealism" and "mismanagement" of the Academy; and, along with the majority of his colleagues, he was derided as being élitist and lacking in ideological substance.2

Shpet's researches, however, were far from retrograde. He regarded the RAKhN program as an opportunity to explore contemporary innovations in philosophical thought (Russian, Soviet, and Western) such as phenomenology and Formalist esthetics and waged a constant battle against narrow idealist philosophies, of which, of course, his detractors were especially guilty. Shpet demonstrated his dedication to the new Russian researches in philosophy by remaining in his homeland after the October Revolution, even though he and his family could have emigrated.3 Contemporary reexamination of Shpet's copious philosophical writings now recognizes the sincerity of his intellectual pursuits and integrity of his scholarship — qualities that his interrogators rejected so peremptorily during the purges.4

1. Shpet became an active member of RAKhN and Director of the Philosophical Section in 1921 shortly after its foundation. In 1924 he was appointed Vice-President of RAKhN.

2. See "RAKhN on Trial: The Purge of Gustav Shpet" in this volume.

3. According to Shpet's grandson, the late Mikhail Polivanov, Shpet was included in the list of scholars who were forced to emigrate in 1923, but, at his own request and through the intervention of Anatolii Lunacharsky, his name was removed from the list. See M. Polivanov, "Zhizn i trudy G. G. Shpeta," in Shpet v Sibiri: sylka i gibele (Tomsk: Volodei, 1995).

4. Apart from Polivanov, Shpet v Sibiri, recent scholarship includes V. Stepin et al., eds., G. G. Shpet. Sochineniia (M: Pravda, 1989); the conference proceedings, Tvorcheskoe

Experiment/Эксперимент, 3 (1997), 189-99.
Shpet was born in Kiev in 1879. He attended the Second Gymnasium there before enrolling in the Physico-Mathematical Department of the University of St. Vladimir also in Kiev in 1898. As a student, Shpet was arrested and then expelled from the University for his association with the Social Democratic Party, although later he returned to renew his philosophical studies at the Historico-Philological Department. Here he made the acquaintance of Georgii Chelpanov and attended his seminar on psychology. Shpet received a gold medal in 1905 for his thesis on "The Problem of Causality in Hume and Kant" and, on completing his degree the following year, entered graduate school in philosophy. In 1907 Shpet moved to Moscow to join Chelpanov at Moscow University and the new Psychological Institute. He now began an active teaching career in philosophy and other subjects, delivering lectures in 1907 at the Higher Women's Courses and then, from 1909 onwards, at Shan- iavsky University. In 1910 he completed his Masters Degree at Moscow University and began to give papers at scholarly conferences and to contribute articles to academic journals such as Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii [Issues of Philosophy and Psychology].

From the first, Shpet played an active role in the intellectual and cultural life of Moscow, particularly in the theater, an experience that informed his researches in philosophy and esthetics. During this early
Moscow period Shpet drew upon his interest in parallel artistic spheres and elaborated his theories of perception and cognition, trying to extend them to all forms of artistic expression. He moved closely with the Symbolist Argonauts, whose experimental poetry he analyzed later in his fundamental treatise on esthetics. Indeed, one of the few recorded memoirs of Shpet by a contemporary comes from the poet Andrei Belyi, a primary member of the Argonauts, whose passion for philosophy complemented the philosopher’s interest in poetry.

From 1910 onwards Shpet spent extended periods abroad at various universities in Berlin, Edinburgh, Paris, and Göttingen. Of particular importance to his philosophical ideas was the academic year 1912-13 in Göttingen, where he studied under the German philosopher and founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and, in 1914, after returning to Russia, Shpet published his monograph on Husserl’s theories, Appearance and Sense, for which he is credited for introducing phenomenology to Russia. Shpet produced a number of important essays at this time: in 1915 he wrote monographs on Herzen and Pamfil Yurkevich and in 1916 defended and published his doctoral dissertation, “History as a Problem of Logic,” on the basis of which he was granted a professorship at the Higher Women’s Courses and an associate professorship at Moscow University; he also wrote a long tract on hermeneutics that, unfortunately, remained unpublished. Between 1917 and 1920 Shpet edited — and contributed to — several volumes of the Moscow philosophical annual Mysl i slovo [Thought and Word]. Shpet continued publishing in the early 1920s with his essay on the development of Russian philosophy and his collection called “Esthetic Fragments” (volumes 1-3). In 1920 Shpet organized the Center for Ethnic Psychology at Moscow University, but shortly thereafter was forced to resign because of his openly non-Marxist approach. Still, in spite of his fragile relationship with the authorities, he established the Institute of Scientific Philosophy the following year and continued to work in the Psychological Institute and to patronize the

7. G. Shpet, Esteticheskie fragmenty I (P: Kolos, 1922); Esteticheskie fragmenty II, III (P: Kolos, 1923).
9. G. Shpet, Yavlennie i smysl Fenomenologiia kak osnovnaia nauka (M: Germes, 1914).
10. G. Shpet, "Avtoreferat" (Shpet’s review of his own "Istoriia kak problema logiki"), Istonicheskie izvestiiia (M), No. 1 (1916), pp. 69-75.
11. See, for example, "Mudrost’ ili razum" in 1917, No. 2, pp. 1-69, and "Skeptik i ego dusha" in 1918, No. 2, pp. 108-68.
12. G. Shpet, Ocherk razvitiia russkoi filosofii (P: Kolos, 1922); and see note 7.
Moscow Art Theater. Shpet was also a regular contributor to the Moscow Linguistic Circle.

But, of course, Shpet's most important contribution to Russian intellectual life of the 1920s was his work at RAKhN which he joined in 1921 as head of the Philosophical Department. As Vice-President from 1924 onwards, Shpet assumed important administrative responsibilities, including the RAKhN publishing venture, which included the regular bulletins and the journal iskusstvo [Art] (Figs. 9, 10). The Department for the Study of Artistic Terminology, whose major project was a dictionary of artistic terms (never completed), was sponsored by the Philosophical Department and cosupervised by Shpet.\(^{13}\) In addition, Shpet delivered numerous lectures at RAKhN, to both the Philosophical Department and the plenary sessions, and some of these such as "Towards the Question of the Organization of Scholarly Research in the Sphere of Art History" were published under the aegis of RAKhN.\(^{14}\)

The focus of the RAKhN research program was on artistic form, especially the relation between the different genres of painting, dance, music, and literature. Shpet studied form primarily in relation to language and the word, which he saw as a model or prototype for other artistic forms. His first important essay on this topic, the "Inner Form of the Word," was published only in 1927, although as early as 1923 he had given a lecture on "inner form," a conceptual paradigm that he inherited from Humboldt and Alexander Potebnia and something that remained a primary focus of his scholarly investigations throughout his tenure at RAKhN.\(^{15}\) Shpet saw the "inner form" of the word as the locus of a dynamic process, the intersection of logical ideas that are then concretized in moments of expression or "external forms." "External forms" are eminently variable and linked directly to the specific cultural context in which they are evolving and, in this sense, Shpet's work is often considered a precursor to modern semiotics. Certainly, Shpet draws his theory from Humboldt's and Potebnia's related notions of the "inner form," but he is less preoccupied with the nineteenth century questions of history and national identity than Humboldt was, or with historic etymology than Potebnia was. Informed by a more fractured and dissociated artistic and philosophical climate (Berg-

13. See the Alexander Gabrichevsky contribution in this volume.
14. G. Shpet, "K voprosu o postanovke nauchnoi raboty v oblasti iskusstvoznaniia," Biuletenu GAKhN (M), No. 4-5 (Sept. 1926), pp. 1-20; also see his "Iskusstvo kak vid znanii," Dekorativnoe iskusstvo (M), No. 2-4 (1996), pp. 26-27. For other writings by Shpet and commentary on him, see E. Pasternak, intr., in Stepin et al., G. G. Shpet. Sochinenia; and Polivanov et al.: Shpet v Sibiri: ssylka i gibel.
15. For example, Shpet spoke on Wilhelm Humboldt's concept of inner form to the Philosophical Department at RAKhN on November 24, 1923.
son, Cubism, and so on) as well as by the heated polemics against Humboldt and Potebnya in the early twentieth century (Formalist literary theory), Shpet relocates the cultural element in the "outer form" of the word, that is, at the immediate moment of articulation. Yet traces of Humboldt's idealism can still be found in Shpet's attention to the "inner form" of the word, which he identifies as the locus of esthetic content.

In his thesis of the word Shpet maneuvers between Kantian philosophy and the materialist, empiricist assertion (particularly of the Formalists) that we need not look for a reality beyond the concrete word. As in his discussion of form, which is focused primarily on "inner form," Shpet promoted the notion of a "logical form" behind the external form that we perceive in reality. This is not an abstraction, but a logical unity or moment of comprehension that proceeds its articulation in tactile forms. "My sole [discussion] of eidos (inner form) was motivated by the fact that I was emphasizing the link between this kind of form and mental activity."16 To this end, Shpet emphasized the idea of form as a dynamic process, as a notion of formulating concepts and judgments, rather than as a simple articulation of them.

Following the purge of RAKhN in 1929, Shpet was expelled and forced to abandon much of his scholarly research, although he was allowed to undertake literary and philosophical translations (he knew seventeen languages) that are still read and appreciated today. In 1935, along with other rakhnovtsy, Shpet was arrested for "anti-Soviet" activities and exiled from Moscow (Figs. 30-33). In 1937 he was arrested again and executed three years later.

16. G. Shpet, "On Various Meanings of the Term 'Form'" below.