



Lucia SALVATO

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan

Review of:

SHPET, Gustav (2019): *Hermeneutics and Its Problems. With Selected Essays in Phenomenology.*

Edited and translated by  
Thomas Nemeth. Springer Nature  
Switzer-land AG. 304 p.  
ISBN: 978-3-319-98940-2

**Engaging with Translation.  
New Readings of  
George Steiner's *After Babel***

Marco Agnetta  
Larisa Cercel  
Brian O'Keeffe  
[eds.]

1/2021

**Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics  
Jahrbuch für Übersetzungshermeneutik**

Journal of the Research Center  
Zeitschrift des Forschungszentrums

**HK**

Hermeneutics and Creativity, University of Leipzig  
Hermeneutik und Kreativität, Universität Leipzig

DOI: 10.52116/yth.vi1.35



**Cite this article:**

Salvato, Lucia (2021): „Review of: SHPET, Gustav (2019): *Hermeneutics and Its Problems. With Selected Essays in Phenomenology.* Edited and translated by Thomas Nemeth. Springer Nature Switzer-land AG. 304 p. ISBN: 978-3-319-98940-2“. In: *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics* 1, pp. 380–387. DOI: <10.52116/yth.vi1.35>.

erate source texts from the prison-house of original languages. Translators are turnkeys, unlatch the cell doors, and release texts from their penitential housing in monolingualism. Translation liberates texts into their expressive futures. Thinking about translation often involves thinking about time itself. So for Benjamin, for Derrida, and for Scott. Scott's approach to translation shows us how not to choose a text's future, and how, instead, to foster the coming and becoming of texts—to hold open the time of their unpredictable *to-come*.

## References

- DERRIDA, Jacques (1998): *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- VENUTI, Lawrence (2019): *Contra Instrumentalism. A Translation Polemic*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.



Lucia SALVATO  
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan

**Review of: SHPET, Gustav (2019): *Hermeneutics and Its Problems. With Selected Essays in Phenomenology*. Edited and translated by Thomas Nemeth. Springer Nature Switzerland AG. 304 p. ISBN: 978-3-319-98940-2.**

‘Im Ensemble der Geisteswissenschaften’, since its development in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century translation hermeneutics has gained particular relevance in relation to human communication and human mental activity in general. At the same time, the study of human sciences, as well as the exercise of translation hermeneutics with respect to the need to understand foreign texts prior to proceeding further, were the object of Spheet’s cultural and linguistic interests.

Gustav Gustavovich Shpet (Kiev 1879 – Tomsk 1937), the Russian professor of philosophy at Moscow University, who was responsible for the introduction of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and philosophy as a rigorous science in the U.S.S.R., is one of the main Russian intellectuals who—although still little known in either the West or East—was instrumental during the early years of the last century in transforming key elements of the human and social sciences in a way that still resonates today. Shpet produced a series of works on epistemology and on the history of philosophy, in particular Russian philosophy. His paper “Aesthetic Moments in the Structure of the Word”, which he later incorporated into his book *Aesthetic Fragments* (1922), led him in the early 1920s to become a member of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* where he participated in the ongoing disputes that centred around methodological approaches to linguistics, affirming his holistic approach through concrete historical studies.

Shpet’s name is associated with a number of relevant undertakings: he was a founder of the *Russian – later State – Academy for the Study of the Arts* (GAKhN), which was created in 1923 but which was closed down by the Soviets in 1929. Here, “Edmund Husserl’s pupil” deeply influenced the Muscovites with the German thinker’s philosophical ideas and through this “intellectual cross-pollination” gave rise to what was termed the “formal-philosophical school” of the late twenties (P. Steiner 1984: 18), in which the principal literary scholars such as Michail Petrovskij, Grigorij Vinokur, and Michail Stoljarov were active. He produced “a veritable torrent of translations” (Nemeth 2019: VI) of philosophical classics and of works by Dickens, Byron, and Tennyson, and contributed to the preparation of an eight-volume edition of Shakespeare, published between 1936 and 1949 (cf. Tihanov 2009). Together with the Russian philosopher and psychologist Chelpanov, he also played a key role in establishing the *Moscow Institute of Psychology* (1912), which they modeled on the European *Institute of Psychology* in Leipzig, and in 1920 he organized the creation of an *Office for Ethnic and Social Psychology*.

On account of his openly expressed political ideas, in the last years of his life Shpet became a victim of the *Great Purge* or *Great*

*Terror*, the brutal political campaign led by the Soviet dictator Stalin against anyone considered a threat to the Soviet regime. Having been removed from teaching at Moscow University, he was arrested in 1935, and charged alongside other colleagues from the State Academy with anti-Soviet activities. He was sentenced first to five years' internal exile and was later sent to the university city of Tomsk in Siberia, where he was able, nevertheless, to work on a new Russian translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to "recently uncovered documents from the former KGB headquarters in Tomsk" (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, IEP), he was arrested again in 1937 and executed at the end of that year.

Shpet's name<sup>1</sup> remained unknown for many years in both Western and Russian circles. As a result, a comprehensive overview of the heterogeneity of his intellectual endeavours was lacking until the early years of this century. Nevertheless, his historical treatises, in which he openly criticizes the utter poverty of the history of Russian philosophy and condemns the subordination of individual creativity to abstract ideals and extraneous authority, have begun to receive a positive response in Western circles. At the same time, some recent contributions (among them P. Steiner 2003, 1984; Ottaviano 2013, 2010)<sup>2</sup> have helped to familiarize scientific or philosophical-linguistic research with his studies on philosophy from a

---

1 Currently, in English his surname is typically rendered 'Shpet', whereas in the Italian and German literature it is given as 'Špet', and it is possible to find French scholars spelling his name as 'Chpet'.

2 In recent decades, research on Shpet has been mainly conducted in France and Germany and that research has produced a series of publications on the various arguments contained in his scientific works. European studies have now revealed the vast breadth of Shpet's interests as well as the different phases of his scientific production. In particular, Ottaviano's first engagement with him (2010) is a long and relevant dissertation on Shpet's life and work; she devotes the first chapter to his intellectual formation, the second to relevant Russian philosophers who, together with Shpet, contributed to the renewal of Russian philosophical thought, and the third chapter to his strict relation with Husserl's phenomenology and their common interests, such as the conception of philosophy as a rigorous science and the anti-psychological methodological approach.

phenomenological viewpoint. In fact, he is nowadays receiving new and genuine attention as “a phenomenologist of language” (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) from both Western and Russian scholars working in philosophy and is considered one of the first intellectuals to have studied language from within a broadly phenomenological perspective.

Sphet also devoted his studies to language and especially to the word as a *principium cognoscendi*, a perspective introduced in his work *Appearance and Sense* (1914) and later again expressed in *Inner Form of the Word. Studies and Variations on a Humboldtian Theme* (1927). In this work, the main subject is the relationship between appearance and sense (learned from Husserl’s work *Logical Investigations*), which encompasses hermeneutics, semiotics, and logic. His contribution to the new theories on language was soon acknowledged by the main exponents of Russian Formalism of his time, as is testified by his exchange of letters with Roman Jakobson (cf. Nemeth 2019: XVIII–XIX).

Sphet’s cultural path reveals significant development, from his initial interest in the philosophy of the human sciences to his later interest in the philosophy of history and then—as a necessary consequence—his engagement with hermeneutics. In fact, in his various studies he examined in particular those philosophers who, in their own way, wrestled with the problem of understanding and recognized the importance of an underlying science, whose issues were associated with other fields of research such as linguistics and psychology.

Making an initial—even if premature—juxtaposition between Sphet and his contemporaneous hermeneuticists Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Heidegger, all of whom had a solid background in Husserlian phenomenology, Thomas Nemeth, editor and translator of this work *Hermeneutics and Its Problems*, acknowledges an important difference in their understanding of hermeneutics. For instance, while in Gadamer the emphasis is on the distinctive methodology of the human sciences, Sphet’s emphasis is mainly on language and on the understanding of written texts, these being considered as signs that operate between the consciousness of the writer—who

writes within a particular socio-historical setting—and that of the reader—who reads the text from the viewpoint of an often different setting. In this way, Shpet’s “textual hermeneutics” (Nemeth 2019: XVI) differs from Gadamer’s ‘anthropological hermeneutics’, the latter being in fact more engaged with Heidegger’s thought than Husserl’s, that is, with a philosophical anthropology.

Shpet’s earliest philosophical concern—the theoretical grounding of the human sciences—became the topic for his monumental academic dissertation, a 500-page-long “*magister’s thesis*” (Nemeth 2019: VI, Footnote 4), entitled *History as a Problem of Logic*. He wrote it in Western Europe between 1912 and 1913 in Husserl’s Göttingen and published it in 1916, aiming to defend the role of history—he was, in that respect, influenced by the viewpoint put forward by Dilthey. In his dissertation, he provided “a brief sketch of his disengagement with his youthful Marxism” and, more explicitly, of “his disillusion with the philosophy of history it offered” (Nemeth 2019: VI). As a further part of his thesis, Shpet intended to write a history of hermeneutics, but this project failed twice, and his work, *Hermeneutics and Its Problems*, only appeared many years later—serialized in the Russian journal *Kontekst* between 1990 and 1993 with the result that it went unnoticed by the majority of Western scholars. The basis of Nemeth’s current edition and translation is part of an even later edition of Shpet’s collected works, edited by Tat’jana Shchedrina (2005).

As Shpet asserts in his preface (XXV–XXVI), one of his articles, *History as an Object of Logic*, was initially supposed to serve as an introduction to the whole exposition set out in *Hermeneutics and Its Problems* because it presented his general position on the matter and showed readers how they should understand his words. For this reason, Nemeth decides to summarize the contents of that article in his introduction, specifically in the second paragraph entitled *Hermeneutics as the Epistemology of History* (cf. Nemeth 2019: VIII–XII).

Shpet’s book has nine chapters and five appendices, and there is also a series of “selected essays in Phenomenology” as the subtitle makes clear. The chapters deal with the development of hermeneu-

tics, from the origin of its concepts and methods to its contemporary maturity, while the appendices clearly reveal his understanding of Husserlian phenomenology. With regard to the origin of hermeneutics, Shpet highlights the essence of its questions as being in close connection with the desire “to provide a conscious account of the role of the *word* as a communicative sign” (Shpet 2019: 1) whose *meaning* is assumed to be either objectively or freely interpretable. Through the figures of Origen and St. Augustine, Shpet introduces the first attempts at a Christian hermeneutics, but shows that it was through the reformer Matthias Flacius that biblical hermeneutics gained importance as the conflict between Protestant and Catholic interpretation led to new principles in hermeneutics. However, the decisive turning point that brought “a new conception of philosophy” (ibid.: 26) was the era of Rationalism: now theology—reconstructed on the model of a historical and social investigation—assumed a philological orientation, and philosophers gained new insight into the relation between sign and meaning. Two chapters are devoted to the reflections of Schleiermacher, who established specific *canons* of hermeneutics and considered interpretation as a methodological technique, thus remaining “unsurpassed” (Nemeth 2019: XIV). Particular importance in the development of hermeneutics is also accorded to Dilthey, a philosopher who, like Schleiermacher, actually “*poses* the problem” (Shpet 2019: 123), advocating for hermeneutics “as the methodological foundation of the study of history and of the human sciences in general” (ibid.: 121). With regard to the current position of hermeneutics, Shpet stresses that the elaboration of “a fully matured problem of understanding” has “already begun” (ibid.: 142), but that its solution should be presented in the form of three problems having to do with empirical psychology, logical methodology, and fundamental philosophy. Lastly, the five appendices with which Shpet concludes his work convey his final reflections on his personal philosophical approach and reveal his close relation to Husserlian phenomenology, thus helping the reader recognize his true importance within the phenomenological movement.

By analysing the reasoning of a number of philosophers working in various schools of thought and over many centuries, Shpet's central claim is that the real turning point in the philosophical treatment of understanding occurs in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. The hermeneutical question of comprehension remains the dimension that can resolve the persistent ambiguities in respect of the Husserlian relationship between ideal and empiric intuition, and as regards his overly subjective analysis of human conscience. Going even further, Shpet's intention is to make philosophy "a rigorous science", that is "a pure knowledge" (Shpet 2019: 212), whose role is to help distinguish what is "illusory" from what is "real" (ibid.: 221). Trying to avoid the "dangers" of naturalism, metaphysics, and transcendentalism, he gives a brief explanation of the three stages through which philosophy, as "fundamental science" forming "the foundation of the specific sciences" (ibid.: 296), should pass: wisdom, metaphysics, and rigorous science. Nevertheless, Shpet ends his study "without firm conclusions" (Nemeth 2019: XV), perhaps in part because—as Nemeth highlights—he intended his text as a sort of introduction to a more comprehensive analysis of understanding which he was never quite able to set out. Even if he considers all the attempts of the philosophers at issue in his book to ground historical knowledge as "very instructive", he also observes that they have proved to be "equally unsuccessful", despite their philosophies being "modeled on empirical natural science by empiricists and positivists" (ibid.: 142).

## References

- IEP – NEMETH, Thomas: "Gustav Shpet (1879–1937)". In: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (updated version). URL: <<https://iep.utm.edu/shpet/>> (08.04.2021).
- NEMETH, Thomas (2019): "Editor's Introduction to 'Hermeneutics and Its Problems'". In: SHPET, Gustav (2019), *Hermeneutics and Its Problems. With Selected Essays in Phenomenology*. Edited and translated by Thomas Nemeth. Springer Nature Switzerland AG, pp. V–XXIII.
- OTTAVIANO, Giulietta (2010): *Gustav Špet fra fenomenologia ed ermeneutica: il contributo di G. Špet al rinnovamento della filosofia in Russia attraverso la diffusione della fenomenolo-*



- gia busserliana, gli studi di estetica e di filosofia del linguaggio*. Roma: Università degli Studi Roma Tre [PhD dissertation].
- ead. (2013): “G. Shpet: A Way from Phenomenology to Hermeneutics”. In: *HORIZON: Studies in Phenomenology* 2/1, p. 62–75.
- SHPET, Gustav (2019): *Hermeneutics and Its Problems. With Selected Essays in Phenomenology*. Edited and translated by Thomas Nemeth. Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- STEINER, Peter (2003): “Tropos Logikos: Gustav Shpet’s Philosophy of History”. In: *Slavic Review* 62/2, pp. 343–358.
- id. (1984): “Who Is Formalism, What Is She?” In: id. [ed.]: *Russian Formalism. A Metapoetics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 15–43.
- TIHANOV, Galin (2009): “Gustav Shpet’s Literary and Theater Affiliations”. In: id. [ed.] (2009): *Gustav Shpet’s Contribution to Philosophy and Cultural Theory*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, pp. 56–80.



Miriam P. LEIBBRAND  
Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna

**Rezension zu: STANLEY, John / O’KEEFFE, Brian / STOLZE, Radegundis / CERCEL, Larisa [Hrsg.] (2018): *Philosophy and Practice in Translational Hermeneutics*. Bukarest: Zeta Books. 398 S. ISBN 978-606-697-060-0.**

Der vorliegende Sammelband aus der Reihe *Translation Studies* (Bukarest, Zeta Books), die mit Cercel (2009) eröffnet wurde, umfasst eine kurze thematische Einleitung der Herausgeber sowie 14 Beiträge, fünf in deutscher und neun in englischer Sprache. Es handelt sich dabei um die Akten der Tagung *Hermeneutics and Translation Studies* (*The Second Hermeneutics and Translation Studies Conference: „New Areas of Research in Translational Hermeneutics“*, deutscher Titel: „Zweite Hermeneutik- und Translationswissenschaftskonferenz: Übersetzungshermeneutik – Ihre Anwendung in neuen Forschungsfeldern“), die, an den Erfolg der ersten Tagung im Mai 2011 anknüpfend, im Juli 2013 am Institut für Translation und Mehrsprachige Kommunikation (ITMK) der TH Köln stattfand. Tagung und Akten können als ein zugleich