
II.4 Hermeneutics

Robert Bird

Hermeneutics in Russia

Hermeneutics theorizes the interpretation of verbal or visual documents. In its broader conception, it denotes philosophical approaches that prioritize the problem of interpretation and understanding. Originating in eighteenth-century German philology, especially the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, in the early nineteenth century hermeneutics became a central feature of German idealism, from G. W. F. Hegel and F. W. J. Schelling to Wilhelm Dilthey, all of whom saw historical and aesthetic sources as crucial evidence of the human spirit. With Martin Heidegger hermeneutics became a fully-fledged metaphysics, informing Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Paul Ricoeur's systematic attempts to reconcile a radical historicism with metaphysical horizons. All of these developments have found enthusiastic responses from Russian philosophers and theorists of culture, despite a virtual ban on metaphysics during the Soviet period. Viewed retrospectively, parallels to the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur help to clarify the stakes of major Russian cultural theories and to highlight their distinctive contributions to critical theory in a global context.

1 The beginnings of hermeneutics in Russia: Gustav Shpet

As a humanistic methodology, hermeneutics arose in Russia together with modern philology in the late eighteenth century, largely at the hands of German ex-patriots like August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735–1809). The preeminence of criticism as a mode of discourse, particularly literary criticism, kept the problem of interpretation at the center of Russian intellectual life throughout the nineteenth century. From Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) and Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) to Visarion Belinskii (1811–1848) and Fedor Dostoevskii (1821–1881), Russian thinkers developed a historicist approach to metaphysical questions based on the interpretation of historical documents and aesthetic creations.

As a properly philosophical paradigm, hermeneutics was introduced to Russia by philosopher Gustav Shpet (1879–1937) in his manuscripts *Istoriia kak problema logiki* (1916, *History as a Problem of Logic*) and, especially, *Germenevtika i ee problemy* (1918, *Hermeneutics and Its Problems*; first published 1989–1993). Shpet's *Hermeneutics and Its Problems* consists largely of a critical overview of approaches to historical understanding by numerous (mainly German) histori-

ans, philologists and philosophers. In its main genealogy and taxonomy, Shpet's history of hermeneutics matches quite closely the standard story told in more recent Western scholarship (see for example Palmer 1969, Grondin 1994). But Shpet's account was not only precocious; it remains distinctive among histories of hermeneutics (see Ghidini 1992; Kalinichenko 1992; Haardt 1993; Fritjof 1997; Chubarov 1997; Kuznetsov 1999; Bird 2009).

Like Heidegger, Shpet was a student of Husserl who sought a new ontology that would "achieve its tasks in this, the immanent world" (Shpet 1996, 388). Considering Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics to be "the point from which we must now proceed" (Shpet 1993 [1918], 261; 1999, 61), Shpet followed Dilthey in defining "understanding" as "a process in which we receive from sensual data psychical experience, of which sensual data are the manifestation" (Shpet 2002, 880). Understanding is knowledge which "from sensual data in human history turns to what is inaccessible to the senses, but what is nonetheless embodied and expressed in outer being" (Shpet 1993 [1918], 256). As George Kline noted, Shpet effectively supplemented Husserl with "a characteristically Hegelian stress on history, tradition, community, culture, and the network of interrelated social institutions and practices that constitute what Hegel called *objektiver Geist*" (Kline 1999, 182). With its historical grounding, understanding also has a political aspect, insofar as "mutual understanding ensures community (*Gemeinsamkeit*) existing amongst individuals, and on the other hand community represents the precondition for understanding" (Shpet 1993 [1918], 259).

Reality that has been understood in a particular way is for Shpet "concrete reality", which is the life no longer of individuals in society, but also of conscious personalities in the realm of the human spirit. With this link to spirit, the historical act of interpretation opens up onto metaphysical horizons, as does Heidegger's analogous concept of "world". In Shpet's view, the emphasis on sensual experience distinguished his hermeneutics from Dilthey's "psychologism", Husserl's "static" and "arid" phenomenology, and Hegel's "dialectic of the objectivized concept" (Shpet 1991 [1918], 253; 1993 [1918], 277–278). Shpet presented his own approach as "a real dialectic, a dialectic of realized cultural sense", in which concept and materiality always go in tandem (Shpet 1927, 116). (These critical passages demonstrate that it is also an oversimplification to see Shpet as merely a "precursor" of Soviet semiotics, as has sometimes been argued [Ivanov 1976, 1998].) Mediating between concept and materiality, understanding provides the only sure foothold of knowledge in the "constant motion" of reality (Shpet 1993 [1918], 279). Understanding thus resolves the problem of eternal regression by providing a basic beginning point for reliable knowledge that relies on no auxiliary means and requires no further derivation (Shpet 1996, 406; 2002, 860–862;

cf. Bowie 1997). The need and ability to understand are the basic facts of human existence, from which all philosophical inquiry must begin.

With understanding at its center, Shpet's philosophy places particular stress on the mechanism of interpretation, which Shpet defines via Dilthey's conceptual triad "experience, expression, understanding": *psychical experience* finds *outer expression* in signs, which are then *understood* by being read back to their origin in inner experience (Shpet 1993 [1918], 256–257). Concrete reality which has been so expressed, and has therefore been made available for understanding, is categorically separate from instrumental reality. Shpet calls it 'detached reality' or, simply, culture. Understanding is knowledge which detaches or suspends (in the sense of *Aufhebung*) a material phenomenon in the realm of pure meaning. This link between understanding and detachment constitutes Shpet's most distinctive contribution to hermeneutic theory.

Shpet's historicizing phenomenology has several notable counterparts in such later hermeneutic theorists as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Like Gadamer, Shpet described the process of knowledge in terms of a "‘dialogue’ with truth": "the realized process of the dialectic in its hermeneutic unfolding can yield only *a single truth*, but as long as the process remains unfinished, the prediction of possibilities remains absolutely free" (Shpet 1992, 37–38). Like Ricoeur, Shpet emphasized the need to include within the hermeneutic process its applied result – exposition and action – which raise raw experience to rational expression in a "verbal-logical form" and complete the "realization of reality" as "culture" (Shpet 1927, 113, 116). Since the knowledge gained from understanding is completed only when it is applied in new acts of expression, thus initiating a new cycle of interpretation, Shpet discounted the possibility of deriving dogmatic truths from past history: "The only lesson we can extract from this is that one must move and complete what has not yet been completed" (Shpet 1993 [1918], 280). For Shpet, as for Ricoeur, the emphasis on application gives understanding an ethical hue; in addition to being, it impinges on the sphere of "duty" (Shpet 2002, 857): "A proposition that we use as a norm [...] becomes such only in the process of *application*", Shpet wrote (Shpet 1996, 381). Finally, Shpet's concept of detachment can be compared to Ricoeur's concept of distanciation. In particular, in his three-volume *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur defined narrative as "the distanciation of fable or *mythos*", which renders the world intelligible in human terms (Ricoeur 1991, 86). Theorizing this detached or distanciated realm of meaning leads both Ricoeur and Shpet to original analyses of categories of aesthetic expression, like narrative, myth, symbol and genre. Therefore the influence of Shpet's philosophy has been especially notable in philosophical aesthetics.

2 Symbolist hermeneutics

While Shpet was the first Russian philosopher to deploy the term hermeneutics, he was not the first to place understanding at the center of a metaphysical theory. As early as 1886 Vasilii Rozanov (1856–1919) completed a massive philosophical study (his debut work) entitled *O ponimanii* (1886, *On Understanding*), which investigated interpretive activity as a constitutive element in human being. Although Rozanov proceeded to become a visible writer on philosophical issues, *On Understanding* was condemned to obscurity; Shpet, for instance, never mentions it. However, Rozanov's philosophical writings display many points of contact with later hermeneutic philosophy; his 1902 essay "Paestum," for instance, deserves to be read alongside Heidegger's *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/1936, *The Origin of the Artwork*).

Shpet's most influential predecessors were the theorists of Russian Symbolism who developed aesthetic theories, largely in response to Nietzsche's critique of German idealism and philology. Best known as an indefatigable advocate of Dionysian frenzy in art, poet Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) analyzed the acts of interpretation and understanding in ways congruous with hermeneutics, despite writing with disdain of the Apollonian aesthetics of "purely-epic detachment" (Ivanov 1971–1987, Vol. 2, 201; cf. Szilard 1993, 2002; Bird 1999). The key concept in Ivanov's negotiation of this distance was the symbol, which both Shpet and Aleksei Losev later adopted to denote material reality that is detached into the realm of understanding and made available for interpretation (Shpet 1989, 358, 411). In 1909 Ivanov directly anticipated Ricoeur's threefold analysis of mimesis in *Time and Narrative* by proposing the "mystical" triad catharsis-mathesis-praxis as the basis not only of aesthetic cognition, but also of an existential philosophy (Bird 2003). In his 1920 dialogue with Mikhail Gershenzon *Perepiska iz dvukh uglov* (*Correspondence from Two Corners*), Ivanov argued for "continuity" as a cornerstone even of revolutionary proletarian culture (Ivanov and Gershenzon, 2006).

For all their differences, Ivanov and Shpet both exerted shaping influence on the religious metaphysics of Aleksei Losev (1893–1988), who placed the concept of detachment at the center of his philosophical masterpiece *Dialektika mifa* (1930, *The Dialectics of Myth*). Instead of Shpet's equation of concrete reality with culture, Losev drew a sharp distinction between myth and art, which for him represented two different types of detachment from everyday reality. Aesthetic detachment corresponds to Kant's concept of aesthetic disinterestedness. For Losev, in aesthetic detachment the meaning of reality is telescoped by being detached from factual being and set off as abstract fiction. By contrast, "Mythical detachment is detachment from the meaning and idea of everyday facts, but not from their fac-

ticity”, i.e. their material incarnation (2003 [1930], 62). “Myth”, Losev declared, “is poetic detachment given as a thing” (2003 [1930], 177). Losev follows Shpet in linking the detachment of art and myth to the concept of expression. Detached reality is not internal or external; rather it is reality which manifests an interchange between the two: “Expression is always dynamic and mobile [...]. Expression is the arena where two energies meet, from within and from without, and their mutual communication in some whole and indivisible image that is at once the one and the other” (2003 [1930], 55). Understanding is the mode by which humans detach from the material world and express it as myth.

The major contrast to Shpet’s treatment comes in Losev’s hierarchical axiology of detachment. For Losev, as for Viacheslav Ivanov, myth is an unquestionably *truer* illumination of reality than art or normal experience. “Myth,” Losev once asserted, “is the fullest perception [of reality]” (RGALI 941.12.49, 20). Moreover, mythical detachment is distinguished precisely by its illumination of hierarchies within reality. When faced with the need to define myth positively, Losev averred that it is marked by “some *detachment* and some *hierarchic character*” (2003 [1930], 33). While he did not specify the origin of this hierarchy, it appears to stem from the human subject’s interaction with reality. After all, myth exists only because there are people to perceive reality mythically, and the hierarchic quality of myth must refer primarily to the gradation of its human subjects, who are elevated either in the cognitive or in the ontological sense. Losev was especially critical of Neo-Kantian approaches to myth, particularly Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923–1929, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*), writing that “Cassirer has not introduced a new concept of ‘understanding’ [...] He has introduced only a description of understanding” (RGALI 941.14.25, 5; cf. Dunaev 1991, 216–218). In the context of Orthodox spirituality, Losev would seem to be implicating the kind of spiritual detachment one finds in ascetic authors such as St. John of the Ladder (John Climacus), in whose *Ladder of Divine Ascent* detachment appears as *memento mori*, exile, poverty, pure prayer (i.e., free of images), and “the vision of things spiritual” (Climacus 1982, 256; cf. Bird 2004). In this way Losev opened the way for integrating patristic sources into the genealogy of hermeneutics. For Losev, understanding is not only a cognitive and ontological category; it is also an ethical position. As mythical detachment, understanding is a mode of living in truth and participating actively in its historical unfolding.

3 Marxist hermeneutics

Although Shpet and Losev mostly confirm the alliance between hermeneutics and metaphysics, even religion, hermeneutic ideas can also be traced in the work of Russian Marxist theorists, particularly those of the so-called Bakhtin Circle. While Shpet and Losev represent a Right Neo-symbolism, then the Bakhtin Circle produced a Left Neo-symbolism that remains a potent influence within critical theory today. In particular, in *Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedenii* (1928, *The Formal Method in the Literary Scholarship*) Pavel Medvedev (1891–1938) laid the groundwork for a Marxist hermeneutics by reconciling the primacy of the economic base with limited autonomy for the cultural superstructure, which Medvedev theorizes as ideology. On the one hand, individual expressions occur only in forms dictated by the dominant ideology:

The ideological environment is the realized, material, outwardly-expressed social consciousness of the given collective. It is determined by its economic being and, in its turn, determines the consciousness of every member of the collective. Properly individual consciousness can only become consciousness when realized in these forms of ideological environment which are given to it: in language, in conventionalized gesture, in artistic image, in myth, etc. (Medvedev 1928, 24)

On the other hand, the ideological environment exists only as an abstract potential, and becomes real only when made material in discrete forms and utterances:

All products of ideological creativity – art works, scientific works, religious symbols and rites, etc. – are material things, parts of reality surrounding man. True, these are a special kind of things, and they possess denotations, meanings, and inner values. But all these meanings and values are given only in material things and acts. They do not submit to actual realization outside of some processed material. (Medvedev 1928, 15)

Each material realization of hitherto abstract “meaning and value” shifts the parameters within the ideological environment. Working directly on material form, seeking expression within available ideological denotations, the understanding and expressing subject produces new ideological meanings and new potentials for everyone else.

For Medvedev each shift in the ideological field occurs as an act of ‘social evaluation’, which is encoded in material form and unpacked in acts of interpretation by the multitude of addressees. Medvedev traces the concept of social evaluation to the Symbolists’ concept of symbol. The entire ideological field, by extension, is comprised of the sum of socially-evaluative acts. Therefore “it is impossible to understand a concrete utterance without participating in its evaluative atmosphere, without understanding its evaluative orientation in the ideologi-

cal environment” (Medvedev 1928, 165). All social communication is the exchange of material evaluations about material evaluations, mediated by the immaterial sphere of ideology: “It is not works that interact, but people; however they interact through the medium of works and thus bring them also into reflected interactions” (Medvedev 1928, 204). An analogous system was developed by Valentin Voloshinov (1895–1936), who in his *Marksizm i filosofiia iazyka* (1929, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*) deftly contrasts his own emphasis on understanding to the Russian formalists’ notion of knowledge as recognition (Voloshinov 1973 [1929], 60). Voloshinov’s book was avidly embraced by Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton in their accounts of Marxist theories of culture (Williams 1977; Eagleton 1983, 116–118). As Williams summarizes Voloshinov,

The real communicative ‘products’ which are usable signs are [...] living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process (Williams 1977, 37).

Though he was a close collaborator of Medvedev (some even attribute Medvedev’s and Voloshinov’s books wholly to his authorship), Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) mostly stayed much further from the hermeneutic tradition. However Bakhtin’s central concepts of unfinalizability and dialogue show him working on parallel lines to those of Gadamer and Ricoeur in the West. In particular, a posthumously published text with the Dilthey-esque title “K filosofskim osnovam gumanitarnykh nauk” (“Towards the Philosophical Grounds of the Humanitarian Sciences”) shows how Bakhtin’s major ideas might be profitably re-read within a hermeneutic framework:

You can’t change the factual, *thingly* aspect of the past, but the meaning, expressive and speaking aspect can be changed, since it is unfinalizable and does not coincide with itself (it is free). The role of memory in this eternal transfiguration of the past. Knowledge is understanding of the past in its unfinalizability (in its non-coincidence with itself). [...] The problem of understanding. Understanding as a seeing of *meaning*, but not a phenomenal seeing, but a seeing of the living meaning of experience and expression, the vision of what is inwardly meaningful, so to speak, of a self-meaningful phenomenon. (Bakhtin 1996, 9)

This admittedly cryptic passage seems indebted to Shpet’s emphasis on the deep meaning of phenomena, which lies beyond the purely functional signification of the surfaces of things. Bakhtin’s application of “unfinalizability” to the past is reminiscent of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s ‘effective history’, according to which the past is seen as fluid and productive, insofar as it is constantly subjected to reinterpretation in the present context. Lastly, Bakhtin relates these insights to the ‘human sciences’, which, by constantly reinterpreting past expressions of

human experience, achieve access to the deep meaning of phenomena and form the present. For all these reasons Bakhtin attracted enthusiastic followers as someone capable of enriching Soviet Marxism with a broader, more historicist engagement with the cultural past.

4 Conclusion

Although only Gustav Shpet fully adopted the language of hermeneutics, the philosophical systems of Gadamer and Ricoeur help to formulate a major theme within Russian cultural theory from Vasilii Rozanov all the way through to the late Mikhail Bakhtin, including also major voices in Marxist aesthetics like Pavel Medvedev. These examples could easily be extended to include more philosophers and theologians of the early twentieth century, such as Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), and later thinkers working already with knowledge of Heideggerian tradition, like Aleksandr Mikhailov (1938–1995), Vladimir Bibikhin (1938–2004) and Sergei Khoruzhii (b. 1941). In all these cases the resources of hermeneutics have provided Russian thinkers a mechanism for constructing a historicist metaphysics, in which documentary and aesthetic texts mediate between material and psychic dimensions of reality. Therefore hermeneutic methods have played a particularly important role in Russian aesthetic theory, especially via such categories as symbol and myth. Although since the millennium hermeneutics has experienced a sharp downturn in interest and vitality, it remains an inalienable dimension in the history of critical theory and a resource for its future development, particularly for teleological accounts of artistic and intellectual culture, such as those informed by Christian theology and by Marxism.

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