

LUCIEN GOLDMANN
 "THE GENETIC STRUCTURALIST METHOD IN THE HISTORY OF LITERATURE"
 (1963)

"The Genetic Structuralist Method in the History of Literature." Towards a Sociology of the Novel. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock, 1975. 156-171.

This essay is in many ways a postface to, or retrospective theoretical framework for, his famous study of the French playwright Racine, The Hidden God: a Study of Tragic Vision in the 'Pensées' of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine (1959). Here, Goldmann begins by arguing that "cultural creation" (156) is but one of the many "sectors of human behaviour" (156) which, as such, is "subject to the same laws" (156) of "scientific study" (156). He attempts to "analyse some of the fundamental principles" (156) of "genetic structuralism" (156) (a term normally associated with the work of the child psychologist Jean Piaget – who had an enormous influence on Goldmann – but which Goldmann uses in a much more expansive way as something of a synonym for Hegelian Marxist theory) as "applied to the human sciences in general and to literary criticism in particular" (156). He also offers a few "reflections concerning the analogy and opposition between the two great complementary schools of criticism . . . associated with this method: Marxism and psychoanalysis" (156). The basis of genetic structuralism is the

hypothesis that *all* human behaviour is an attempt to give a *meaningful response* to a particular situation and tends, therefore, to create a balance between the subject of action and the object on which it bears, the environment. This tendency to equilibrium, however, always retains an unstable, provisional character, in so far as any equilibrium that is more or less satisfactory between the mental structures of the subject and the external world culminates in a situation in which human behaviour transforms the world and in which this transformation renders the old equilibrium inadequate and engenders the tendency to a new equilibrium that will in turn be superseded. . . . Thus human realities are presented as two-sided processes: *destruction* of old structurations and *structuration* of new totalities capable of creating equilibria capable of satisfying the new demands of the social groups that are elaborating them. (156)

He concludes that the "scientific study of human facts, whether economic, social, political, or cultural, involves an effort to elucidate those processes by uncovering both the equilibria which they are destroying and those towards which they are moving" (156).

A "whole series of problems" (156) suggest themselves, one of which is the "problem of knowing who in fact is the *subject* of thought and action" (157). Goldmann lists three possible responses: that of the "empiricists, rationalists and, more recently, phenomenologists" (157) who identify this subject with the "individual" (157); "certain types of romantic thought" (157) which "reduce the individual to a mere epiphenomenon and see in the collectivity the only real, authentic subject" (157) (an approach that borders on "mysticism [157] in so far as it "denies the individual all reality and autonomy" [157] and believes that the individual "may and must become identified wholly in the totality" [157]); and "dialectical Hegelian, and above all Marxist thought" (157) which, while accepting that the collective is the real subject, stress that "this collectivity is no more than a complex network of inter-individual relations and that it is important always to specify the structure of this network and the particular place that the individuals occupy within it – the individuals appearing quite obviously as the immediate, if not ultimate, subjects of the behaviour being studied" (157).

The question arises, however, as to "why the work should in the first place be attached to the social group and not to the individual who wrote it" (157). This is important given that the "dialectical perspective does not deny the importance of the individual" (157) and the "rationalist, empiricist, or phenomenologist positions do not deny the reality of the social environment" (157) which they equate with an "external

conditioning, that is to say, as a reality whose action on the individual has a causal character" (157). In Goldmann's view, the answer is simple:

when it tries to grasp the work in its cultural (literary, philosophical, artistic) specificity, the study that confines its attention solely or primarily to the author may . . . account, *at best*, for its internal unity and the relation between the whole and its parts; but it cannot establish in a positive way a relation *of the same type* between this work and the man who created it. (157)

Goldmann argues that the "psychological structure is too complex a reality for one to be able to analyse it with the help of various sets of evidence concerning an individual who is no longer alive, or an author whom one does not know personally, or even on the basis of the intuitive or empirical knowledge of an individual to whom one is bound by close bonds of friendship" (157). This is why he repeats his point made in The Hidden God that "no psychological study can account for the fact that Racine wrote precisely the dramas and tragedies that he did and explain why he could not . . . write the plays of Corneille and Moliere" (157-158).

In studying great cultural works, "sociological study finds it easier to uncover *necessary* links by relating them to collective unities whose structuration is much easier to elucidate" (158). These unities are "complex networks of inter-individual relations" (158) in which the

complexity of the psychology of individuals derives from the fact that each of them belongs to a fairly large number of different groups (familial, occupational, national, friends and acquaintances, social classes, etc.) and that each of these groups acts upon his consciousness thus helping to form a unique, complex, and relatively incoherent structure, whereas conversely, as soon as we study a sufficiently large number of individuals *belonging to one and the same social group*, the action of other different social groups to which each of them belongs and psychological elements due to this membership cancel themselves out, and we are confronted with a much simpler, more coherent structure. (158)

This is why Goldmann contends that the "relations between the truly important work and the social group, which – through the medium of the creator – *is, in the last resort, the true subject of creation*, are of the same order as relations between the elements of the work and the work as a whole" (158). In both case, we deal with the "relations between the elements of a comprehensive structure and the totality of this structure, relations of both a comprehensive and an explanatory kind" (158). For this reason, he argues, "in so far as science is an attempt to discover *necessary* relations between phenomena, attempts to relate cultural works with social groups *qua* creative subjects proves . . . much more effective than any attempt to regard the individual as the true subject of creation" (158).

However, two problems arise in turn. Firstly, that of "determining what is the order of the relations between the group and the work" (158); secondly, that of "knowing between which works and which groups relations of this type may be established" (158). On the first point, genetic structuralism, exemplified by the "work of Georg Lukacs" (159), represents a "real turning-point in the sociology of literature" (159). "All other schools of literary sociology, old or contemporary, try in effect to establish relations between the *contents* of literary works and those of the collective consciousness" (159), an approach which presents "two major conveniences" (159): A) traces of "elements of the content of the collective consciousness, or, quite simply of the immediate empirical aspect of the social reality that surrounds him, is almost never either systematic or general and is to be found only at certain points in his work" (159). In other words, a "sociological study . . . oriented, exclusively, or principally, towards the search for correspondences of *content*, . . . allows the unit of the work, and with it its *specifically literary* character" (159); and B) the "reproduction of the immediate aspect of social reality and the collective consciousness in the work" (159) is more frequently found in the work of writers of little "creative force" (159) who is "content to describe or recount his personal experience

without transposing it" (159). For this reason, "literary sociology oriented towards *content* often has an anecdotal character" (159) and is most effective in the study of "*works of average importance or literary tendencies*" (159), as opposed to "major works of creation" (159). Genetic structuralism offers a "total change of orientation" (159) in its view that the

collective character of literary creation derives from the fact that the *structures* of the world of the work are homologous with the mental structures of the certain social groups or is in intelligible relation with them, whereas on the level of content, that is to say, of the creation of the imaginary worlds governed by these structures, the writer has total freedom. (159)

The writer creates the imaginary worlds by inserting "the immediate aspect of his individual experience" (159) into his works.

Goldmann summarises the "relation between the creative group and the work" (159) in this way: the "group constitutes a process of structuration that elaborates in the consciousness of its members affective, intellectual, and practical tendencies towards a coherent response to the problems presented by their relations with nature and their inter-human relations" (159). However, these "tendencies fall far short of effective coherence, in so far as they are . . . counteracted in the consciousness of individuals by the fact each of them belongs to a number of other social groups" (159). Moreover, mental categories exist in the group only in the form of tendencies moving towards a coherence I have called a world-view, a view that the group does not therefore create, but whose constituent elements it elaborates (and it alone can elaborate) and the energy that makes it possible to bring them together. The great writer (or artists) is precisely the exceptional individual who succeeds in creating a given domain, that of the literary (or pictorial, conceptual, musical, etc.) work, an imaginary, coherent, or almost strictly coherent world, whose structure corresponds to that towards which the whole of the group is tending; as for the work, it is, in relation to other works, more or less important as its structure moves away from or close to rigorous coherence. (160)

This points to a crucial difference between what he terms the "sociology of contents" (160) and "structuralist sociology" (160): the "first sees in the work a *reflection* of the collective consciousness, the second sees it on the contrary as *one of the most important constituent elements* of this collective consciousness, that element that enables the members of this group to become aware of what they thought, felt, and did without realising objectively its signification" (160). This is why the former approach best deals with average works while the latter, the genetic structuralist approach, is more effective in dealing with the "masterpieces of world literature" (160). Such works "represent . . . the expression of world views, that is to say, slices of imaginary or conceptual reality, structured in such a way that, without it being necessary to complete their structure in essence, one can develop them into over-all world" (160).

It is at this point that an "epistemological problem" (160) presents itself: though "*all* human groups act on the consciousness, affectivity, and behaviour of their members, only the action of certain particular, specific groups encourage cultural creation" (160). The "structuration" (160) of slices of imaginary reality takes place on the part of only those "groups *whose consciousness tends to an over-all vision of man*" (160). He contends that "social classes" (160) are the only groups of this kind (though, he warns, this may not be true of "non-European societies" [161] where other factors may come into play). He is of the view that the "affirmation of the existence of a link between great cultural works and social groups oriented towards an over-all restructuring of society or towards its preservation eliminates at the outset any attempt to link them to a number of other social groups, notably to the nation, generations, provinces, and family, to mention only the most important" (161). He admits that these groups do "act on the consciousness of its members and therefore on that of the writer, but they can explain

only certain peripheral elements of the work and not its essential structure" (161). For example, he argues, a common 'Frenchness' does not explain the work of Pascal, Descartes, or Gassendi, nor that of Racine, Corneille and Moliere "to the very extent that these works express different and even opposite views, although their authors all belong to seventeenth century French society" (161), though it may explain the presence of "certain formal elements common" (161) to these thinkers.

Goldmann then turns his attention to what he terms the "most important problem of all sociological research of a genetic-structuralist type: that of the 'carving-up' (*découpage*) of the object" (161) which one is striving to comprehend. One can "study structures only if one has defined . . . the set of immediate empirical data that make it up" (161) while "one can define these empirical data only in so far as one already possesses a more or less elaborate hypothesis about the structure that gives them unity" (161). This presents a problem of something of the order of "which comes first, the chicken or the egg?". Goldmann's solution: one

sets out with the hypothesis that one may gather a number of facts into a structural unity, one tries to establish between these facts the maximum number of comprehensive and explanatory relations by trying to include in them other facts that seem alien to the structure that one is uncovering. . . ; one repeats this operation by successive approximations until one arrives . . . at a structural hypothesis that can account for a perfectly coherent set of facts. (161-162)

Those who study "cultural creation" (162) find themselves at an advantage: "great literary, artistic, or philosophical works constitute coherent signficatory structures" (162) for which reason the object of study in question is always already to some extent carved up. However, each such work can "contain heterogeneous elements" (162) that undermine its unity. Furthermore, such unity is diminished the more one considers "*all the writers of one and the same writer*" (162).

Hence, Goldmann's recommendation that one begin with the analysis of each of a writer's work and study them in the order of composition. Proceeding in this way will enable us to make provisional groupings of writings on the basis of which we can seek in the intellectual, political, social, and economic life of the period, structured social groupings, in which one can integrate, as partial elements, the works being studied, by establishing between them and the whole intelligible relations and, hopefully, homologies. . . . The progress of a piece of genetic-structuralist research consist in the fact of delimiting groups of empirical data that constitute structures, relative totalities . . . which . . . can later be inserted as elements in other larger, but similar structures, and so on. (162)

This "method" (162) has the "double advantage first of conceiving of the whole set of human facts in a unitary manner and, then, of being both *comprehensive* and *explanatory*" (162). The reason for this is that the "elucidation of a signficatory structure constitutes a process of *comprehension*, whereas its insertion into a larger structure is, in relation to it, a process of *explanation*" (162). He then illustrates what he means by arguing that to "elucidate the tragic structure" (162) of one of Racine's plays is a process of comprehension (or understanding) whereas to "insert them into extremist Jansenism by uncovering the structure of this school of thought is a process of comprehension, but a process of explanation in relation to the writings of . . . Racine" (162). In turn, "to insert Jansenism, as a movement of ideological expression, into the history of the seventeenth century noblesse de robe is to explain Jansenism and to understand the *noblesse de robe*" (162), and so on.

In short, the "passage from appearance to essence, from the partial, abstract, empirical datum to its concrete, objective signification is brought about by the insertion into relative, structured, and signficatory totalities – every human fact may, and even must possess a certain number of signfications, differing according to the number of structures into which it can be inserted" (163).