

THE HIDDEN GOD

A Study of Tragic Vision in the *Pensées* of
Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine

Lucien Goldmann
Translated by
Philip Thody

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To
MONSIEUR HENRI GOUIER

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PREFACE

When I began this work, I had two different but complementary ends in view.

The first was to develop a scientific method for the study of literary and philosophical works, and the second to contribute to the understanding of a particular set of texts which, in spite of considerable differences between them, did seem to me to be closely linked together.

The category of Totality, which is at the very centre of dialectical thought, prevented me from making any rigorous distinction between considerations of method and the actual process of research, since these are simply two aspects of the same question.

It seems to me, in fact, that the method lies wholly in the research itself, and that this research can be valid and fruitful only in so far as it becomes progressively more aware of its own progress and of the conditions which make such progress possible.

The central idea of this book is that facts concerning man always form themselves into significant global structures, which are at one and the same time practical, theoretical and emotive, and that these structures can be studied in a scientific manner, that is to say they can be both explained and understood, only within a practical perspective based upon the acceptance of a certain set of values.

Setting out from this principle, I have shown the existence of one of these significant global structures—the tragic vision—which has enabled me to bring out and understand the essence of several theological, ideological, philosophical and literary phenomena, and also to analyse relationships between these phenomena that had not been noticed before.

Thus, in my attempt to bring out the principal features of the tragic vision (Part One), and to use this vision to study Pascal's *Pensées* and Racine's tragedies, I have also been led to show that it is one of several elements that make up the common essence shared by the movement and ideology of 'extremist' Jansenism (Part Two), of the *Pensées*, of Kant's critical philosophy (Part Three) and, finally, of Racine's theatre.

The reader must judge for himself to what extent the present work has in fact enabled me to fulfil these two initial complementary aims.

I should like now to use this preface to forestall two possible

PREFACE

objections. I have, naturally, read a number of works both on the tragic vision and on the nature of the scientific study of literary and philosophical works, and have concentrated especially on the ideas expressed by Marx, Engels, Georg Lukács and on the view of tragedy put forward by Hegel (particularly in his *Aesthetics*, and above all in the outstanding chapter on the Ethical Order in *The Phenomenology of The Mind*). The fact remains, however, that even in the case of Lukács, there was too much difference between what I was trying to do and the views expressed by these authors to enable me to discuss them in any detail. Thus, in order to avoid complicating the issue, I have studied the early writings of Lukács only in so far as he is concerned with tragedy, and not at all from the standpoint of his theories on a science of philosophy and literature.

I may also, in my attempt to express dialectical ideas in a terminology which is not yet used to them, have made remarks which appear contradictory. Thus, I have written both that it is impossible to elaborate a 'scientific sociology', an objective science of facts concerning man, and that we must try to achieve 'a definite and scientific knowledge' of such facts. And, for want of a better word, I have even called such knowledge 'sociological knowledge'. Similarly, I have stated that the *Pensées* were not written 'for the free-thinker', but that, among their potential audience, we do find free-thinkers etc., etc.

There is in fact no real contradiction between these various statements. Unlike the facts discovered by physics and chemistry, facts concerning man cannot be found out impersonally, from the outside, and by methods which exclude value judgements and practical considerations. These facts must, however, be of an equally certain and reliable nature, and, from this point of view, there is no contradiction between a refusal of 'scientism' and the desire to attain a scientific, historical and sociological knowledge of facts concerning man, a knowledge quite opposed to speculation and belletristic essay writing.

Similarly, Pascal did not write the *Pensées* 'for the free-thinker' in the sense that he was developing an *argumentum ad hominem* which he himself did not accept and which he did not believe was valid for the believer. Nevertheless, like all philosophical works, the *Pensées* are addressed to everyone who does not think as their author does, and this necessarily includes free-thinkers.

In every case, these contradictions are merely apparent ones which I could have avoided by making up an abstract language that was suited to the immediate needs of the situation, but which would have also been obscure and unintelligible for the lay reader. Too much clarity darkens, wrote Pascal, and I have preferred genuine clarity to any purely formal and apparent clarity.

PREFACE

I should like to conclude by thanking all those who have helped me by their advice, their comments, their criticisms and their objections, and, above all, Monsieur Henri Gouhier, who has watched over the writing of this work in all its stages.

'Tragedy is a game . . . a game which is watched by God. He is nothing more than a spectator, and he never intervenes, either by word or deed, in what the actors are doing'.

GEORGE LUKÁCS, *The Metaphysics of Tragedy*, 1908.

'The Bishop of Nantes, in his wisdom, taught me a saying of Saint Augustine's which has greatly comforted me: that he who is not satisfied with God alone as a witness to his actions is too ambitious'.

MOTHER ANGÉLIQUE DE SAINTE-MADELEINE,
Letter to Arnauld d'Andilly
on January 9th 1623.

PART ONE

The Tragic Vision

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I

THE WHOLE AND THE PARTS

THIS book forms part of an overall philosophical undertaking. Although scholarship is essential to the development of any serious philosophical thesis, I have set out to write neither a work of pure scholarship nor an exhaustive study of certain aspects of French literature in the seventeenth century. Both philosophers and historians are concerned with the same facts,¹ but they approach them from different points of view and with different ends in mind.²

The historian whose main concern is with scholarship remains on the level of the abstract empirical phenomenon, which he tries to analyse in the minutest detail. He thus does something which is not only useful in itself, but which is also indispensable to the historian whose concern is with philosophical ideas, and whose aim is to set out from the same abstract empirical phenomena in order to discover their conceptual essence.

Thus, the two types of research are complementary, since scholarship provides the philosophically minded historian with the facts that he needs, while his speculations guide scholarship in the tasks which it is to undertake, and indicate the greater or lesser importance of the innumerable facts which constitute the inexhaustible mass of available information.

Unfortunately, over-specialisation encourages a one-sided view of the matter, so that the importance of one of these two branches of research is often neglected: the scholar considers that the only thing which really matters is the establishment of a particular point about

¹ And they should, of course, have as good a knowledge of these as possible, bearing in mind both the general state of the knowledge available and the time and energy at their disposal.

² Needless to say, it is possible for one man to be at one and the same time a scholar and an enquirer into philosophical matters.

what the author in question did or said, while the philosopher looks with a certain contempt at the man who does nothing but accumulate facts without trying to decide on their relative importance and general meaning.

I will waste no time over this problem, and will state that I hold the following two propositions to be axiomatic: the only possible starting-point for research lies in isolated abstract empirical facts; the only valid criterion for deciding on the value of a critical method or of a philosophical system lies in the possibility which each may offer of understanding these facts, of bringing out their significance and the laws governing their development.

The problem remains, when the facts under discussion concern the nature and activity of man, of deciding whether or not this can be done except by making these facts concrete by a dialectical conceptualisation.

I set out in this book to try to solve this problem by studying a number of texts which, for the historian of literature and ideas, are a clearly defined unit of empirical facts: the *Pensées* of Pascal and four tragedies by Racine, *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Bérénice* and *Phèdre*. I shall try to show how both the subject matter and construction of these works are more clearly understandable when they are analysed from a materialistic and dialectical standpoint. I need not add that this is a limited and partial undertaking which is in no way intended to constitute, by itself, a proof of the validity of the method adopted. The value and limitations of such a method can finally be decided only by a whole series of such works, some of which have already been written by the various materialistic historians who have followed the example of Marx, many of which still remain to be written.

Although scientific knowledge is built up step by step, we can still hope that each result which is definitely acquired will enable us to move forward more quickly. I am myself certain that this work of scientific investigation is, like human knowledge and awareness in general, a collective phenomenon which requires the co-operation of innumerable individual efforts. I therefore hope to contribute both to the fuller understanding of the work of Pascal and Racine, and to the elucidation of our knowledge of the structure of consciousness and its expression in literature and philosophy. Needless to say, any contribution which I make will be both completed and transcended by further work carried out along the same lines.

I should, however, like to insist that the above statement of the limitations of my ambitions is not merely the expression of personal modesty. It is part of a definite philosophical position, characterised by the rejection of any analytical philosophy which accepts the existence of rational first principles or starts with the recognition of

the absolute validity of sense experience. Both rationalism, by assuming the existence of innate and immediately accessible ideas, and empiricism, by its reliance upon sensation or perception, presuppose that at any moment in a particular investigation there is a certain amount of definitely acquired knowledge, from which scientific thought moves forward in a straight line, admittedly with varying degrees of certainty, but without being normally and inevitably¹ obliged to keep returning to problems already solved. Both rationalism and empiricism are thus opposed to dialectical thought, for this affirms that there are never any absolutely valid starting-points, no problems which are finally and definitely solved, and that consequently thought never moves forward in a straight line, since each individual fact or idea assumes its significance only when it takes up its place in the whole, in the same way as the whole can be understood only by our increased knowledge of the partial and incomplete facts which constitute it. The advance of knowledge is thus to be considered as a perpetual movement to and fro, from the whole to the parts and from the parts back to the whole again, a movement in the course of which the whole and the parts throw light upon one another.

On this point, as on many others, Pascal's work marks the great turning-point in Western thought, the moment at which it began to abandon the atomistic approach of rationalism and empiricism, and to move towards dialectical reasoning. Pascal himself was aware of this, and noted it in two fragments which throw particular light upon the radical difference between his own philosophical position and that of any kind of rationalism or empiricism. In my view, these fragments provide the clearest possible expression both of Pascal's own attitude and of that of any dialectical thinker, whether one of the great representative figures like Kant, Hegel, Marx or Lukács, or someone such as myself, whose aim is to write only a more modest, partial and limited work like the present book.

I shall now quote these fragments, pointing out that I shall come back to them in the course of the work, and also stating that it is from the point of view which they express that we can and should try to understand both Pascal's work as a whole and the meaning of Racine's tragedies.

If man were to begin by studying himself, he would see how incapable he is of going beyond himself (*passer outre*). How could it be possible for a part to know the whole? But he may perhaps aspire

¹ Rational or empirical thought does in fact quite often go back over results already acquired, and there is certainly no *a priori* reason for it not to do so. Such an activity, however, does not form an essential part of its nature, and therefore remains accidental and, in principle, avoidable.

to a knowledge of at least those parts which are on the same scale as he himself. But the different parts of the world are all so closely linked and related together that I hold it to be impossible to know one without knowing the others and without knowing the whole (fr. 72).

Thus, since all things are both the result and the cause of causes, both helpers and receivers of help, both mediately and immediately linked together by a natural and imperceptible chain which connects together things most distant and distinct from one another, I hold it to be equally impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole, and to know the whole without having a particular knowledge of each part (fr. 72,¹ E.390).

Pascal is aware of how sharply such a concept sets him apart from the rationalist position of Descartes, who held that although we cannot grasp the infinite, we can at least base our ideas upon reliable starting-points or obvious first principles. Descartes did not see that we meet the same problem when we study the parts as we do when we try to understand the whole, and that in so far as one fails to know the part, so it is also impossible to know the whole.

But infinity in small things is much less visible: all the philosophers have attempted to achieve knowledge of it, and all have fallen down on this point. It is this which has given rise to the titles which we find so often: *Of the Nature of Things*, *Of the Principles of Philosophy*, and others which are just as pretentious in fact even if less so in appearance, like the one proposed by the man who dazzled us with his ambitions when he wrote: *De omni scibili* (fr. 72, E.390).

It is in the context of this way of looking at things that we must take absolutely literally and give its full meaning to fragment 19: 'The last thing one discovers when writing a work is what one should put first' (E.8).

This means that no study of any problem can ever be finally completed, either as far as the whole or as far as the individual details are concerned. Even if we were to begin writing the book again, we should still have to wait until we had finished before finding what ought to have been put first. Moreover, what is true of the whole is also true for each of the parts taken separately: though none of these is a primary element, each is a relative whole when taken by itself. Thought is a constantly living endeavour in which progress is real without ever being linear, and in which it can never be said to have come to an end and be finally completed.

¹ Pascal's *Pensées* are quoted in the Brunschvicg edition by Monsieur Goldmann in the original French version of this work. In translating them into English, I have made occasional use of the Everyman translation by John Warrington, and have also added the reference number to the different order that of the Lafuma edition—which is observed in the Everyman translation. This number is indicated by a capital E.

It should now be clear why, apart from any subjective reasons, it is impossible for epistemological considerations to look upon this study as anything but a stage in the study of a problem, a contribution to an undertaking which can neither be carried out by one individual nor ever hope to achieve final completion.

The main concern of any philosophical investigation is man, his behaviour and his knowledge of himself. In the final analysis, every philosophy implies an anthropology, a complete view of the nature of man. It would clearly be going outside the scope of this work to define the whole of my own philosophical position; however, since I shall be concerned with philosophical and literary questions, I will give a brief account of my own view of human consciousness in general and of literary and philosophical creation in particular.

I set out from the fundamental principle of dialectical materialism, that the knowledge of empirical facts remains abstract and superficial so long as it is not made concrete by its integration into a whole; and that only this act of integration can enable us to go beyond the incomplete and abstract phenomenon in order to arrive at its concrete essence, and thus, implicitly, at its meaning. I thus maintain that the ideas and work of an author cannot be understood as long as we remain on the level of what he wrote, or even of what he read and what influenced him. Ideas are only a partial aspect of a less abstract reality: that of the whole, living man. And in his turn, this man is only an element in a whole made up of the social group to which he belongs. An idea which he expresses or a book which he writes can acquire their real meaning for us, and can be fully understood, only when they are seen as integral parts of his life and mode of behaviour. Moreover, it often happens that the mode of behaviour which enables us to understand a particular work is not that of the author himself, but that of a whole social group; and, when the work with which we are concerned is of particular importance, this behaviour is that of a whole social class.

The multiple and complex phenomenon of the relationship which each individual has with his fellows often separates his daily life as a member of society from his abstract ideas or his creative imagination, so that the relationship which he has with his social group may be too indirect for it to be analysable with any degree of accuracy. In cases such as these - which are numerous - it is difficult to understand a work if one comes to it through a study of the author's life. What he intended to say, and the subjective meaning which his books had for himself, do not always coincide with their objective meaning, and it is this which is the first concern of the philosophically-minded historian. For example, Hume was not himself a thorough-going sceptic, but the empiricism to which his work gave rise does lead to

an attitude of complete scepticism. Descartes believed in God, but Cartesian rationalism is atheistic. It is when he replaces the work in a historical evolution which he studies as a whole, and when he relates it to the social life of the time at which it was written—which he also looks upon as a whole—that the enquirer can bring out the work's objective meaning, which was often not completely clear for the author himself.

As long as one remains on the level of the expression of personal ideas, the differences between the Calvinist and Jansenist doctrines of Predestination remain real but scarcely visible; it is when we pass to the study of the social and economic behaviour of the various Jansenist and Calvinist groups that the differences stand out with absolute clarity. The Calvinist groups studied by Max Weber practised self-denial but remained active in society, thus making an outstanding contribution to the process of capital accumulation and to the rise of modern capitalism. The extreme Jansenist groups, on the other hand, refused to take part in any worldly activity of any kind, whether social, economic, political or even religious. It was this difference in outlook which expressed itself in the hostility which the Jansenists felt for the Calvinists, which was a real and fundamental hostility that cut across the apparent similarities between the two doctrines. Racine offers us a similar example, for while a study of his personal life does not greatly help us to understand his tragedies, these can nevertheless be partially explained by a comparison with Jansenist ideas and by a study of the social and economic position of the legal profession under Louis XIV.

Thus, the historian of literature or of philosophy begins with a series of empirical facts consisting of the texts which he is going to study. He can approach them in one of three ways: by methods of textual analysis which I shall call 'positivistic'; by intuitive methods based upon feelings of personal sympathy and affinity; or, finally, by dialectical methods. Leaving aside for the moment the second group, which in my view is not properly scientific, there is only one criterion which enables us to separate the dialectical from the positivistic approach: the two methods consider the actual texts to be both the starting-point and the conclusion of their researches, but whereas one method offers the opportunity of understanding the more or less coherent meaning of these texts, the other does not.

The concept already mentioned of the relationship between the whole and the parts immediately separates the traditional methods of literary scholarship, which frequently pay insufficient attention to the obvious factors revealed by psychology and by the study of society, from the dialectical method. The actual writings of an author, in fact, constitute only a sector of his behaviour, a sector

depending upon a highly complex physiological and psychological structure which undergoes great changes during his life.

Moreover, there is an even greater though similar variety in the infinite multiplicity of the particular situations in which an individual can be placed during the course of his existence. Certainly, if we had a complete and exhaustive knowledge of the psychological structure of the author in question and of his daily relationship with his environment, we should be able, if not wholly then at least partially, to understand his work through his life. The acquisition of such knowledge is, however, both for the present and in all probability for the future, a Utopian dream. Even when we are dealing with people alive at the present day, whom we can test and examine in the laboratory, we can only achieve a more or less fragmentary view of any particular individual. This is even more the case when the man we are trying to study has been dead for a long time, and when the most detailed research will reveal only a superficial and fragmentary image of him. At a time when, thanks to the existence of psycho-analysis, of Gestalt psychology, of the work of Jean Piaget, we have a better awareness than ever of the extreme complexity of the human individual, there is something paradoxical in any attempt to understand the work of Pascal, Plato or Kant by a study of their life. However great the apparent rigour with which research is conducted, any conclusion is bound to remain extremely arbitrary. We must certainly not exclude the study of biographical details, since these often provide extremely useful information. However, it will always remain merely a partial and auxiliary method which must never be used as the final basis for any explanation.

Thus, the attempt to go beyond the immediate text by incorporating it into the author's life is both difficult and unlikely to provide reliable results. Should we therefore go back to the positivistic approach, and concentrate on everything implied by a 'complete study of the text'?

I do not think so, for any purely textual study comes up against obstacles which cannot be overcome until the work has been fitted into the historical whole of which it forms part.

First of all, how is the 'work' of an author to be defined? Is it everything which he ever wrote, including letters, notes and posthumous publications? Or is it only the works that he himself completed during his lifetime and intended for publication?

The arguments in favour of one or the other of these two attitudes are well known. The principal difficulty lies in the fact that not everything which an author writes is equally important for an understanding of his work. On the one hand, there are texts which can be explained by personal and accidental circumstances, and

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