CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VYGOTSKY AND LURIA ON ROMANTIC SCIENCE

Consciousness is reflected in the word like the sun is reflected in a drop-let of water.
(Vygotsky 1934)

Vygotsky joined Luria and Leontyev at the Moscow Institute of Psychology, and they began work under Kornilov, resulting in a stinging critique of Kornilov’s own theory, Reactology, along lines not dissimilar to Vygotsky’s Congress speech. Vygotsky visited his home town of Gomel, married Roza Smekhova, and took steps to set up the Institute of Defectology, where he created conditions for continuation of his research somewhat out of the spotlight of Moscow. Early in 1925, five new students were recruited to the ‘troika’ in Moscow, swelling the team to eight, all of them young. In 1926, Vygotsky suffered another bout of tuberculosis, but once he returned to work, the group began to work their way through the literature of all the currents of psychology at the time, in Europe and America as well as in the Soviet Union, and at the same time, they worked out their own methods of experimental work.

The chief characteristic of their work was collaboration (Stetsenko 2004).

There is an imperative in publishing nowadays to ascribe every text to a specific author, and this is frustrated by the manuscripts left by the Vygotsky School from this period, because they often failed to ascribe authorship to works which may have been written by one person, but describing the research of another, or may have been written collaboratively or left unsigned. The group met frequently and discussed issues while someone took notes. They had a thoroughly collaborative method of work inasmuch as they all shared a common project, and their individuality was immersed in that common project. At that period, the Bakhtin Circle was also working collaboratively, with little attention to attribution of authorship; it seems that the collaborative approach was embedded in the collectivist ethos of the whole social system.
Also, their experiments entailed a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the experimental subject.\footnote{In line with convention, I will use “experimental subject” to refer to the person whose behavior is the subject-matter of the experiment, but who is in a certain sense the “object” of the experiment.} Elsewhere, psychological experimentation was founded on the positivist principle of ‘scientific objectivity’; this meant that the researcher must create a documented and repeatable experimental set-up and procedure, and then record the subject’s response without any ‘interference’ or ‘influence’ by the researcher, which would ‘corrupt’ the data. Nowadays, thanks to the impact on science of a number of anti-positivist currents in philosophy and social theory, there is widespread recognition of the validity of a variety of approaches to psychological testing and experimentation (Chow 2002), and the psychoanalytic tradition never accepted this stricture either. Nonetheless, the multiple-choice questionnaire, statistical sampling, double-blind trials and standardized test procedure are as ubiquitous in psychological research today as ever. For almost as long as psychology has existed as a science in its own right, students of psychology have been inculcated with the idea of statistics as their principal research tool. Such methods have their place, but they are presaged on the assumption of indifference of the target population to the research objectives, the indifference of the researcher to the interests of the experimental subjects as individuals, and of a conception of the person as a social atom, whose normal condition is in isolation from others. Under these conditions, collaboration between researcher and subject is ruled out. The experimental subject is just a black box which converts input stimuli to output responses by some unknown means.

If experimental subjects understand the idea of scientific research and what it means to be a research subject, they usually participate willingly as required by the researcher. When set a task, subjects will genuinely try to complete it. There are limits to this relationship to which we will return later on, but in the simplest case, all that is at issue is whether the researcher stands back and observes the efforts of the subject in isolation, or on the contrary, intervenes in some way so as to help the subject complete the task, these efforts then becoming part of the subject matter of the experiment.