

## Robert Langbaum's Continuing Romanticism

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Robert Langbaum's remarkable, lasting study *The Poetry of Experience* puts forward two arguments, each of which would have been enough to sustain a longer work of less ambition, and, it is a good question to ask of the book: what they have to do one with the other? The twin themes are caught in the subtitle, which joins them by an innocuous "in" that belies greater complexities: *The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. First, then, a good part of the book is dedicated to an analysis of how dramatic monologues work, principally examples by Tennyson, Browning, and T.S. Eliot. The terms of the discussion have since become well-known: "sympathy versus judgment" (75) is how Langbaum puts it at the beginning of the crucial chapter, but the idea of "versus" gets reworked in subtly different ways later on, as a "tension between" (85) at one point, elsewhere as a "split between" (85, 105), and as "a disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment" (140) at another. All these formulations are attempts to get at the same phenomenon: while reading a dramatic monologue, the more normal moral sense is temporarily put on hold as the mind is caught up, instead, by the chance to "participate" in the "hard core of character" one has encountered (83). Those terms come from Langbaum's memorable account of "My Last Duchess," the murderous Duke of which is, in some ways, the star turn of the book, since his startling immorality shows up the technique at its most arresting. In Browning's poem readers gain entrance to the consciousness of someone the whole point of whom is that he is very different indeed from themselves: for it is the business of a dramatic monologue to inhabit "[t]he extraordinary point of view" (96) and slowly to reveal it so that it comes upon the reader as a dawning realisation of alien-ness. Naturally, "speakers who are in some way reprehensible" (85) fulfill the requirement of differentness with special colour, and so serve as the stock in trade of dramatic monologues. (A successful and self-congratulatory psychopath could admire the vigour of the Duke's portrait but would not be different enough from him really to get Browning's poem.) Few serious commentators on the dramatic monologue have been able to ignore what Langbaum said in his book; and, while the argument about sympathy and judgment has been tackled numerous times, it seems to have stood up remarkably well. The pages in which Langbaum sets out his case remain an example of criticism as its most compelling, partly because they enter into an imagined reading experience with such felicity; and, if it were indeed the case that writers on the subject

used habitually to begin by remarking how little had been written about it (75), then Langbaum's discussion must have put that shortage right for good.

But what of the second entwined ambition? That is an argument on quite a different scale – not an evocation of the experience of reading a particular sort of poem, but, rather, a large-scale attempt to redraw the literary history of the 19th and 20th centuries, asserting the existence of intellectual and imaginative continuity where one might have expected to find, rather, revolution and disruption. Within its original moment, this is the aspect of the book which was most intently revisionist. Many of the main voices of Modernism had cast themselves as proceeding in a principled rejection of Romanticism, and most subsequent authorities had taken them at their word. But Langbaum's ambition, counter-culturally, was to advance "a theory to connect the poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to connect romanticism with the so-called reactions against it" (35). As one reviewer at the time noted, placing such an emphasis upon the lasting innovations of the Romantic poets "suggests that contemporary poets and critics (Eliot, Pound, F.R. Leavis in *New Bearings*) are in error": "If established, this reinterpretation of the last hundred and seventy-five years of English poetry could be of great historical importance to literary criticism" (Hall 356). That reviewer was right, and it was to prove indeed of great historical importance. However, as R.A. Foakes pointed out in his own review of *The Poetry of Experience*, Langbaum was not quite alone in putting forward a new interpretation of literary history: the book came out, Foakes noted, at about the same time as Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* and John Bayley's *The Romantic Survival*, and all were intent to show a roughly similar literary-historical phenomenon: "a continuance of Romantic themes and attitudes in the work of modern poets" (Foakes 104). Actually, said Foakes, a sign of those times, Langbaum had the harder task, for Kermode and Bayley were at least concentrating on 20th century writers whom no one doubted worthy of attention (Yeats, Eliot, and Hulme for Kermode; Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and Auden for Bayley); and Langbaum was writing about Browning, which obliged him, quite apart from the case for a Romantic genealogy, to persuade the reader that Browning was worth bothering with in the first place.

Anyway, what is at stake in these arguments is a different way of conceptualising Romanticism. It is

no longer to be thought of as merely an historical episode in the late 18th and early 19th century, but more as a permanent shift of sensibility or mentality, the establishment of a predicament within which everyone coming afterwards was compelled to operate. The 1950s saw this conception move from bright idea to critical orthodoxy. There were some earlier glimpses of the revisionary idea, some of them to be found in the modernists whom Langbaum and others were gathering back into the Romantic fold. Eliot, for example, said in the Norton lectures which he gave in 1933: "It has perhaps not been observed that in its more comprehensive significance 'Romanticism' comes to include nearly everything that distinguishes the last two hundred and fifty years or so from their predecessors" (128). That would seem to put Langbaum's historical thesis very lucidly, although, of course, Eliot is diagnosing something of which he disapproves and would wish to see rectified. Langbaum and Kermode were not even quite the first to see that, behind the polemic, Eliot might be lingering within the Romanticism he ostensibly deplored. Yvor Winters had described Eliot as "the leader of the intellectual reaction against the romanticism of which he began his career as a disciple"; but, as Winters went on crossly to argue, he was a lost leader – his "reactionary position," which Winters warmly endorsed, turned out to be just "an illusion" (460). Winters was a highly gifted but cantankerous critic: not many people in the mid-century were criticising Eliot for not being anti-romantic *enough*; but the basic idea of a Romantic continuity, which Winters expresses with such vehemence, was being increasingly voiced in less judgmental ways. Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* (1931), say, was based on the background assumption that the continuities in modern literary history were more telling than the disunities: its starting point was that modern literary history is "to a great extent that of the development of Symbolism and of its fusion or conflict with Naturalism." And, as Kermode comments, "[i]n view of the close relations of Symbolist and Romantic aesthetics, this can be taken to mean that modern literature is still working out the revolutionary theses of the first Romantics" (Kermode, 56).

Kermode was writing those words shortly after the appearance of his own *Romantic Image*, of which they are a precise summary; but there is not much evidence to suggest that that aspect of Wilson's work proved especially revelatory to his contemporaries. Still, by the 1940s, the continuing Romanticism thesis was spreading. Langbaum quotes Randall Jarrell in *The Poetry of Experience* from a lecture of 1950, remarking on the strange ways in which "romanticism was purified and exaggerated and 'corrected' into

modernism" (Langbaum, 73; quoting Jarrell, *Poetry*, 23). But much earlier, in 1940, Jarrell had already offered a characterisation of "'Modern' poetry" as, "essentially, an extension of romanticism; it is what romanticism wishes or finds it necessary to become" (*Kipling*, 48). Expanding on this in a 1942 article for *The Nation*, Jarrell sketched an evolutionary path between the Romantics and the Modernists, disagreeing with the opinion of "everyone" — that modernist poetry is marked by its "*differentness*" — and arguing instead for "the essentially romantic character of modernist poetry," even though it may seem "improbable or unpleasant to some [. . .] readers" (*Kipling*, 76, 77, 83). At about the same time, in England, Geoffrey Faber tentatively suggested in the preface to his own collected poems that "the anti-romanticism of the moderns is itself a variety of romanticism" (21). That is a gestural sort of critical comment; but the sense of a new order of knowledge surely establishing itself became more palpable in the opening sentence of M.H. Abrams's masterpiece *The Mirror and the Lamp*: "The development of literary theory in the lifetime of Coleridge was to a surprising extent the making of the modern critical mind" (vii). In *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956), Murray Krieger anticipated Kermode in returning Hulme and Eliot to the Romanticism from whence they came: "an uncompromising prejudice against romanticism [is] coupled with an invocation of romantic and Coleridgean concepts, even when Coleridge has been slandered by name" (35). And by 1958, the position seems secure enough for Lord David Cecil to offer it in the introduction to an anthology he co-edited with Allen Tate: "Unromantic though we may feel," writes Cecil, "the romantic age is not yet over" — indeed, the "second phase of romanticism is still in full swing" (27, 29). Langbaum's book was, said Graham Hough, in one of the most positive and intelligent of the early reviews, "another step in the now general recognition that the contrast between the last century's poetry and our own has been greatly overstressed" (78).

Doubtless other anticipations of the general notion might be found: what matters is the way in which Langbaum seized an idea which was in the air and made something of it. Foakes was certainly right to spot a common enterprise with Bayley and Kermode; but they weren't doing quite the same thing. Kermode's argument in *Romantic Image* was that a certain magical, non-discursive idea of poetic language (and an associated idea of the poet) had persisted through from the Romantics to the Moderns, one which had produced some marvellous poetry to be sure, but which nevertheless as a theory roused Kermode's suspicions: the book ends with the hope that we might be able to put it all behind

us and go back to the discursive public manners of the 17th century. Bayley's argument was more selective still in the continuity it discerned: for Bayley, only some modern poets really showed the "survival" of Romanticism, which involved the cultivation of a sort of individual childlike vision of wonder, "the buoyant child surviving in the man," in Coleridge's lovely phrase. As became clear when he reviewed Kermode's book, Bayley was not at all persuaded that, in his own terms, everyone was really a Romantic if you looked hard enough: "Mr Kermode cannot quite make us believe that we are all going to the Romantic heaven and that Hulme is of the party" (199).

Langbaum's book did something different from either. It singles out what he calls "the romantic idea," something which is subsequently "perpetually realized through isolation from incidental accretions" (31), and relates it, not in the first instance to a conception of poetry or poethood, but to a changing metaphysics which affects everyone. Implicitly, Langbaum looks back to a famous passage in Matthew Arnold in which Arnold describes the ways in which Goethe set modernity going by his version of a Copernican revolution: "he puts the standard, once for all, inside every man instead of outside him; when he is told, such a thing must be so, there is immense authority and custom in favour of its being so, it has been held to be so for a thousand years, he answers with Olympian politeness, 'But is it so? is it so to *me*?' Nothing could be more really subversive of the foundations on which the old European order rested. . ." (110). Arnold is struck by the extraordinary proliferation which this constitutes, but, always aware of the perils as well as the excitements of disorder, he does not use the word "subversive" here as an uncomplicated honorific; and Langbaum's book gets something of that same mixture of feelings. He chooses as his own key term, "experience," by which he means the pluralistic life led, as Arnold's Goethe asserted that life from now on must be, from a particular point of view – "that disequilibrium of actuality between the observer and his perception which is characteristic of the poetry of experience" (64-5).

What was it that made Browning's masterpiece *The Ring and the Book* the thing it was, wondered G.K. Chesterton, and unhesitatingly gave the answer: "It is the great epic of the age, because it is the expression of the belief, it might almost be said, of the discovery, that no man ever lived upon this earth without possessing a point of view." Langbaum similarly celebrates the poem for coming at the one thing from markedly different directions: "the disparity in points of view gives the lifelike effect"

(134), and says of the modern dramatized lyric in general that it starts in "the singleness of the point of view" (137)—"points of view" being originally Browning's phrase (134). In a way, Langbaum's notion of continuing Romanticism might best be understood as a brilliantly resourceful substantiation of Chesterton's inspired but typically throwaway remark – a working out of the implications that, as Langbaum himself put it in a later essay, the Romantics and post-Romantics were defined by being "aware of themselves as inside, or as having organized the experience they were perceiving" (*Modern Spirit*, 165). You never get just flowers in modern poetry: they are always, like the flowers in "Burnt Norton," flowers which have "the look of flowers that are looked at."

In one sense, then, the question how the two arguments going on in *The Poetry of Experience* connect to one another has a very simple answer: the dramatic monologue becomes the archetypal form of all modern poetry, which typically involves the evocation of an "extraordinary point of view" (96). That is a thesis which, naturally, readers can test against their own favourite modern poems. Browning, at any rate, might have been moved to demur, however incoherently: "There may be no end of poets who communicate to us what they see in an object with reference to their own individuality; what it was before they saw it, in reference to the aggregate human mind, will be as desirable to know as ever" (162). Langbaum would want to reassure Browning that he had already shown that the only way to portray the "aggregate human mind" in what he calls "a relativist culture" (64) is by portraying an array of individualities; but whether that is really a norm for modern verse is a further question.

Such questions aside, there are also some other, more subtle, connections between the parts of the book which testify to its intricate and finely meditated nature: the workings of the dramatic monologue have an unannounced relationship with the nature of the historical argument which Langbaum puts forward, as though one part of the book were offering an oblique reflection on the proceedings of the other part. One thing the dramatic monologue is especially good at doing is imagining historical difference – "projecting an historical point of view" (96); and this involves a play to and fro between an awareness of difference and the recognition of sameness. The intently imagined historical differentness captured in a dramatic monologue set in Renaissance Italy, say, works by setting what is alien against what is recognisable or, as Langbaum puts it, in one of many fine formulations: "It can be said of the dramatic monologue generally that there

is at work in it a consciousness, whether intellectual or historical, beyond what the speaker can lay claim too. This consciousness is the mark of the poet's projection into the poem; and it is also the pole which attracts our projection, since we find in it the counterpart of our own consciousness" (94). In enunciating so well the interpenetration of projection and perception, Langbaum suggests, too, something important and complicated about the way in which the historical imagination always works.

Isaiah Berlin was committed—no less than the Romantics about which he wrote so memorably—to the idea of diversity as the central fact about the human universe; but he recognised clearly that you cannot encounter something which is sheerly diverse with anything but blank incomprehension: "If values had varied very widely between cultures and periods, communication would have been harder to achieve, and our historical knowledge, which depends on some degree of ability to understand the goals and motives and ways of life at work in cultures different from our own, would turn out to be an illusion" (45). Langbaum puts that point this way: "historical change is apparent because we can measure it against a recognizably continuous human or psychological reality" (*Modern Spirit*, 78). And such a reflection involves an evident parallel with his own practice as a literary historian in the great book, which takes poems that otherwise look quite unlike any poem that might be written now and yet finds within them evidence of a shared predicament. At the same time, it leaves open, as a necessary uncertainty should be left open, just how much "projection" is going on when we spot a kindred spirit – "of how far we are projecting ourselves and of how limited a manifestation of our life the projection is" (205).

The historicism that moves in Langbaum's large scale story has a kinship with the readerly experience he describes on the smaller scale of his literary criticism; and the quirky life of those poems parallels something else that moves in his big argument too. The "Romantic idea" that emerges triumphantly as the hallmark of what's modern is an idea of the individual and its unique truth, a principle of difference which is foundational to the new view of mankind. What matters is the evocation of "particularity," which quickly becomes paradoxical, because being individual is what everyone has in common: "As the sign of his particularity, the particular perspective is therefore the sign of his universality," Langbaum says of the dramatic monologuer (205). A fully imagined speaker properly exceeds the poetic occasion of his appearance, and spills into a life which the poem cannot contain: that is impressionis-

tic, no doubt, but Langbaum is surely right to identify as part of the effect of the greatest dramatic monologues the feeling that, as he puts it superbly, "the speaker has one foot inside the poem and one foot outside" (204), a phenomenon which he no less rightly associates with a kind of characterisation that feels essentially Shakespearean. Of the fully realised monologuer, it is "impossible to generalize him as concept" (205), just as anything one might say to sum up Hamlet or Falstaff always leaves something out of account.

What holds good for a speaker should hold good for a poem, which also matters for its own individual particularity. But to discern in many poems a "Romantic idea," realising itself over time, seems paradoxically to go against the grain of such prized differentness: *The Poetry of Experience* finds what all this poetry, which had once seemed so irretrievably diverse, has in common, and to that extent it resembles the mythical method that Langbaum elsewhere described in the otherwise arch-diversitarian Browning – "Such collapsing of diverse events into a single pattern is at the heart of the mythical method" (*Modern Spirit*, 98). The case against the gatherings effected by any powerfully generalising concept is always the charge of "collapsing . . . diverse events." Lévi-Strauss memorably said of the eminent formalist Propp that before him no one knew what all the many folk tales had in common, and after him "we have been deprived of any means of understanding how they differ" (133); and, somewhat similarly, but back in the world of literary criticism, Leavis objected to René Wellek's invitation to consider a "romantic view of the world" as a way of approaching literature. However familiar, Leavis's comment retains a permanent currency: "The romantic view of the world,' a view common to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and others — yes, I have heard of it; but what interest can it have for the literary critic? For the critic, for the reader whose primary interest is in poetry, those three poets are so radically different, immediately and finally, from one another that the offer to assimilate them into a common philosophy can only suggest the irrelevance of the philosophic approach" (216).

What is true of a generalization encompassing "Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley" can only become still more true if it encompasses Browning, Hopkins, Eliot as well. And yet, as Langbaum demonstrates, the finding of things in common can be a brilliantly suggestive critical activity, illuminating and enriching, even if the big truths discovered are no sooner established than a counter-movement of the critical mind starts off to undo them back into particularity again. What characterises the poetry of experience, he says

on an early page, is “the deliberate disequilibrium between experience and idea” (35), and the same might be said of his book, which brings its literary examples into play as evidences of its motivating “romantic idea,” but then grants them (the Browning poems, especially) what the poetry of experience values more than anything else: a life of their own, “the greatest possible surge of life” (208). “Meaning comes not from theoretical interpretation but from the intensest concreteness,” he says at another point (134); but the truth is that, for Langbaum, meaning comes from the interplay between the two, in the poems he writes about as well as in the literary history he constructs.

It would be a little slick to end by claiming that this dynamic between individual reality and general truth is itself somehow “Romantic,” when it is probably merely human; but one can at least venture that it was something of which Coleridge was particularly self-aware:

Now this is my case – & a grievous fault it is /  
my illustrations swallow up my thesis / I feel too intensely the omnipresence of all in each, platonically speaking – or psychologically my brain fibres, or the spiritual Light which abides in the brain marrow as visible Light appears to do in sundry rotten mackerel & other smashy matters, is of too general an affinity with all things – and tho’ it perceives the difference of things, yet is eternally pursuing the likenesses, or rather that which is common / bring me two things that seem the very same, & then I am quick enough to shew the difference, even to hair-splitting – but to go on from circle to circle till I break against the shore of my Hearer’s patience, or have my Concentricals dashed to nothing by a Snore – that is my ordinary mishap. (ii.2372)

Langbaum’s thesis about the persistence of the “romantic idea” in *The Poetry of Experience* remains marvellously unswallowed up by his illustrations, I should say; but, true to the principle of particularity he celebrates within them, they retain in his readings a vividness and idiosyncrasy that exceeds that idea of them. *The Poetry of Experience* is handsomely committed to a thesis of very inclusive ambitions,

but no less conscious that, as *The Ring and the Book* intimates, “truth is larger and in advance of the formulations and institutions of any age” (124), including the formulations and institutions of literary criticism.

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