

# The Poetry of Experience

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*The Dramatic  
Monologue  
in  
Modern Literary  
Tradition*

Robert  
Langbaum

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**THE POETRY OF EXPERIENCE**

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*The Dramatic Monologue in  
Modern Literary Tradition*

Robert Langbaum

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*To Francesca*

## PREFACE

Since I have in 1971 the opportunity to write this preface to a new edition of a book that first appeared in 1957, I can only be grateful for the reception the book has had. There were a few errors in the 1957 hardcover edition; thanks to the friends and critics who pointed them out. Some of these errors were corrected in the first paperback edition of 1963, the rest are corrected here. I have also made, in the course of the two paperback editions, some small changes based on second thoughts of my own.

I would like to take this opportunity to answer the two main objections to my position that have emerged since 1957. The first has to do with my account of the dramatic monologue as deriving its special effect from the tension between sympathy and judgment. Several fine critics have objected to what they considered my implication that there are no moral judgments to be made in, say, Browning's dramatic monologues. Since these critics are well disposed towards *The Poetry of Experience*, the fault must be mine for not having made myself sufficiently clear; though I would have thought my readings of Browning's dramatic monologues—of *Andrea del Sarto*, to take only one—involve moral judgment at every point. Let me clarify, however, by saying that if there is to be a *tension* between sympathy and judgment, then both poles must be fully operative.

*Sympathy*, as I use it, has a technical meaning. It does not mean *love* or *approval*; it is a way of knowing, what I call romantic projectiveness, what the Germans call *Einfühlung*, what the psychologists call empathy. The difference between the dramatic monologue and other forms of dramatic literature is that the dramatic monologue does not allow moral judgment to determine the *amount* of sympathy we give to the speaker. We give him all our sympathy as a condition of reading the poem, since he is the only character there. The

difference is that we split off our sympathy from our moral judgment. The dramatic monologue is most effective when the speaker is reprehensible; for we are then most acutely aware of the moral condemnation that is, not abolished, but temporarily split off from our sympathy. We take this excursion into sympathetic identification with the speaker in order to refresh and renew moral judgment. Because it depends on sympathy, the dramatic monologue is not the best vehicle for satire; although some of Browning's dramatic monologues contain satirical elements, none is pure satire. The dramatic monologue begins to do what the novel does even more conspicuously. Both modern forms teach us how to reinvalidate moral judgment in an empiricist and relativist age when no values can be taken for granted.

This leads to the second main objection to *The Poetry of Experience*—the objection to my reading of Browning's *The Ring and the Book* as a relativist poem. Certain critics have quite understandably taken off from the obvious difficulty that Browning dictates our judgments in Book I to argue that the poem is not relativist but mainly a demonstration of Guido's absolute wickedness and Pompilia's absolute goodness. The trouble with this argument is that it renders Browning's method supererogatory, since the reader has nothing to do but watch a demonstration through ten monologues of what is clearly established by Browning's account in Book I. It is surely a more workable hypothesis to take seriously Browning's innovating use of points of view, and conclude, as I originally did, that in forcing our judgment in Book I Browning did not carry his relativism far enough.

Our sympathetic identification with different points of view refreshes and renews moral judgment. That is how *The Ring and the Book* reasserts on a new relativist basis the Christian values originally questioned—the absolute reality of good and evil. Far from being a flaw in the poem's relativism, the *right* judgments of Book I are—as I now realize and have recently explained<sup>1</sup>—a stroke of genius. For by giving us the sort of God's-eye view we never get in real life, Browning makes us understand how relative, on the one

<sup>1</sup> In *Essays in Criticism* (October 1970); thanks to the editors for permission to use these last two paragraphs.



hand, are human institutions and judgments, and on the other, that the relative is our index to the absolute. The question of relativism does not after all apply to God or a hypothetical ultimate reality; it applies to *knowable* reality. Browning says *human* institutions and judgments are relative, but that their fallibility throws us back on instincts which at their deepest connect with an absolute reality that can be felt though not known.

All the major characters arrive at this connection, but the process is most forcefully dramatized in Guido—who, when he imagines in his second monologue the horrors of his coming execution, lives through a hell that like Dante's substantiates and illuminates evil. When Guido finally speaks out of his deepest instinct, he recognizes in his own absolute evil and Pompilia's absolute goodness the reason for the fundamental antagonism between them. To watch Guido arrive at the truth through unpeeling, in his two monologues, layers of deception and then self-deception is for us the moral exercise that should renew the stale old words *good* and *evil*. Our return from the ultimate insights of Caponsacchi and Pompilia to the ordinary world of the lawyers, and from the ultimate insights of the Pope and Guido II to the mixed motives and distorted judgments of Book XII, reminds us with a shock that such insights are unrepresentative miracles in a world where the general rule is Fra Celestino's that "God is true/And every man a liar" (XII, 597-98). This is the relativist "moral" of the poem.

R.L.

#### NOTE TO THE 1985 EDITION

It is gratifying to prepare still another edition—this time addressed to a new generation, a generation which shows no abatement of interest in the dramatic monologue. I have corrected the few remaining typographical errors and have made a few revisions, some of them designed to clarify my argument about the tension in the dramatic monologue between sympathy and judgment.

R. L.

Charlottesville, Virginia, May 1985

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R. L.

*Ithaca, New York, December 1956*

## INTRODUCTION

### *Romanticism as a Modern Tradition*

“IN English writing we seldom speak of tradition,” T. S. Eliot complained back in 1917.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, thanks largely to Mr Eliot’s influence, an opponent of his might complain, we seldom speak of anything else. But we do not have to be opponents of Eliot to recognize that the volume of talk about tradition has increased considerably since World War I, that the word which, as Eliot tells us, seldom appeared “except in a phrase of censure” now appears almost always in phrases of approval, phrases which mark the approver of tradition as a man of advanced ideas.

Why, we may well ask, should a word which used to carry associations of stale orthodoxy carry for us the shine of novelty? Because the word has been used, more frequently and emphatically than before 1917, to remind us that tradition is the thing we have not got, to remind us of our separation from the past, our modernity. The word helps construct for us that image of ourselves which constitutes the modern pathos, the image of ourselves as emancipated to the point of forlornness, to the point where each is free to learn for himself that life is meaningless without tradition.

I can connect  
Nothing with nothing

says Eliot’s modern equivalent for Ophelia, after she has been seduced. Ophelia is pathetic because her inability to make connections is a sign of madness. But the inability of Eliot’s ruined lady to make connections is a sign of the times. It expresses perfectly the meaning of *The Waste Land*, as of all those poems and novels which ring most poignantly of the new age.

For we have used the contrast with tradition to define not only our separateness from the whole heritage of the West but

<sup>1</sup> “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 13; (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), p. 3.

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to define also our separation from the immediate past, to define the special character of the twentieth century as an age distinct from the nineteenth. The curious thing about the twentieth century's reaction against the nineteenth is that we have levelled against the nineteenth century two apparently opposite charges. On the one hand, we have accused the nineteenth century of not being untraditional enough, of trying to compromise with the past, to cling through a false sentimentality to values in which it no longer really believed. On the other hand, we have accused the nineteenth century of breaking with the past, of rejecting *the* tradition, the "main current," to use Eliot's phrase, of Christian and humanist culture.

The apparent contradiction can be reconciled, however, once we realize the special nature of modern traditionalism, that it is built upon an original rejection of the past which leads to an attempt to reconstruct in the ensuing wilderness a new principle of order. If the nineteenth century ought to have swept away the sentimentally sustained debris of the past, it was because the debris hindered the work of discerning the really enduring patterns of human existence. Thus, Eliot's *Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* are at once more nihilistic and more deliberately traditional than any nineteenth-century works. In their accounts of the present, Eliot and Joyce show with uncompromising completeness that the past of official tradition is dead, and in this sense they carry nineteenth-century naturalism to its logical conclusion. But they also dig below the ruins of official tradition to uncover in myth an underground tradition, an inescapable because inherently psychological pattern into which to fit the chaotic present.

Eliot, in reviewing *Ulysses* for *The Dial* of November 1923, showed how modern anti-traditionalism clears the ground for modern traditionalism. Taking issue with Richard Aldington's condemnation of Joyce as a "prophet of chaos," Eliot calls *Ulysses* "the most important expression which the present age has found" precisely because Joyce has shown us how to be "classical" under modern conditions. He has given us the materials of modern disorder and shown us how to impose order upon them.

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a

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method which others must pursue after him. . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form which Mr Aldington so earnestly desires. And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance.

The passage indicates the special nature of modern traditionalism in that Eliot does not talk about adherence to a publicly acknowledged tradition. He talks about a tradition which the past would not have recognized, a tradition tailored for a modern purpose by modern minds. And he talks, in the final sentence, of a sense of order won as a personal achievement in the face of external chaos.

The interesting thing is that both ideas, the idea of the past and of the superior individual as giving meaning to an otherwise meaningless world, derive from that same nineteenth-century romanticism against which Eliot is in reaction. Whatever the difference between the literary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they are connected by their view of the world as meaningless, by their response to the same wilderness. That wilderness is the legacy of the Enlightenment, of the scientific and critical effort of the Enlightenment which, in its desire to separate fact from the values of a crumbling tradition, separated fact from all values—bequeathing a world in which fact is measurable quantity while value is man-made and illusory. Such a world offers no objective verification for just the perceptions by which men live, perceptions of beauty, goodness and spirit. It was as literature began in the latter eighteenth century to realize the dangerous implications of the scientific world-view, that romanticism was born. It was born anew in at least three generations thereafter as men of

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genius arrived intellectually at the dead-end of the eighteenth century and then, often through a total crisis of personality, broke intellectually into the nineteenth. As literature's reaction to the eighteenth century's scientific world-view, romanticism connects the literary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The nineteenth century is, for example, both anti-traditional and traditional in the same sense as the twentieth. Carlyle, in addressing Voltaire in *Sartor Resartus*, both accepts and rejects the eighteenth century. " 'Cease, my much-respected Herr von Voltaire,' " he says, speaking in the guise of the German Professor Teufelsdröckh,

'shut thy sweet voice; for the task appointed thee seems finished. Sufficiently hast thou demonstrated this proposition, considerable or otherwise: That the Mythus of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth. Alas, were thy six-and-thirty quartos, and the six-and-thirty thousand other quartos and folios, and flying sheets or reams, printed before and since on the same subject, all needed to convince us of so little! But what next? Wilt thou help us to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live? What! thou hast no faculty in that kind? Only a torch for burning, no hammer for building? Take our thanks, then, and——thyself away.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the nineteenth century accepts the iconoclastic contribution of the eighteenth. It starts with the acknowledgment that the past of official tradition is dead. But it seeks beneath the ruins of official tradition an enduring truth, inherent in the nature of life itself, which can be embodied in a new tradition, a new Mythus.

The famous romantic sense of the past derives its special character from the romanticists' use of the past to give meaning to an admittedly meaningless world. It is just the difference between the romantic and the classical sense of the past that the romanticist does not see the present as the heir of the past and does not therefore look to the past for authority as an ethical model. The romanticist sees the past as different from the present and uses the past to explore the full extent of the difference, the full extent in other words of his own modernity.

<sup>1</sup> Ed. C. F. Harrold (New York: Odyssey Press, 1937), Bk. II, Chap. IX, pp. 193-94.

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Thus, Scott's sense of the past with its emphasis on costume, architecture and obsolete custom, on what is picturesquely peculiar to the past.

Such emphasis, curiously enough, helps to rescue from the past its core of life. For it is when everything else is as different as possible that we become most aware of the concrete life which remains our one point of contact with the past. Scott is often accused of projecting modern men into the Middle Ages, of making his characters aware of themselves as historical. We feel this in Scott because, reading him, we become aware of ourselves, with our modern historical consciousness, under the archaic costumes. It is, however, the whole point of the romantic use of the past to give us this sense of our own life in it. For it is our own life we feel when we feel the life of the past.

By giving us as exotic a past as possible, the romanticist gives us a past which, because it is inapplicable to the present, we can inhabit as a way not of learning a lesson but of enlarging our experience. It is just to the extent that we see the clothing of the past as a costume, as inapplicable to the present, that we project ourselves into the costume in order to feel what it would be like to live in the past. It is, in other words, when we no longer take the past seriously as an official tradition that we begin to "romanticize" it, which means that we rescue from beneath the ruins of the official tradition a more fundamental continuity, that core of life around which Carlyle would build his new Mythos.

Carlyle calls his philosophy of history a Clothes Philosophy. His point, as expressed in *Sartor*, is that the clothes of an age are symbolic of its institutions, which are in turn symbolic of its myth, its common faith. It is only by some miracle of common faith that the man in fine Red has the authority to condemn to the gallows the man in coarse Blue; while the spectacle of a naked Duke of Windlestraw addressing a naked House of Lords would be without any authority or significance whatever.<sup>1</sup> But the myth can give authority only as long as it is believed in. Once it is no longer believed in, clothes and institutions must be changed to accord with the new faith. In this sense, the Clothes Philosophy is relativist, asserting an anti-traditionalist principle of discontinuity in history.

<sup>1</sup> Bk. I, Chap. IX, pp. 60, 62.

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It also asserts beneath the discontinuity, however, a fundamental continuity, the unchanging need of every age for clothes, for institutions and the myths which give them authority. The need itself is a sign that the changing myths are developing articulations of a truth inherent in the nature of human life. The Enlightenment had said that the past is dead and offers no model for the future. Carlyle admits that the particular articulations of the past are dead, but insists that the human need which they were designed to meet must still be met. The old Mythos may be dead, but mankind must have a new one to replace it. In this sense, the Clothes Philosophy is traditionalist and a corrective to the Enlightenment. It shows us how to be, as Eliot would say, "classical" under modern conditions, how to give meaning to the modern world by taking from the past not its dogmatic myth but the ground of life beneath it—the life of which the old myth was an expression and which we must try to express again in our own terms.

But how, without dogma, can the modern traditionalist hope to make the new Mythos? Here the superior individual performs his function. He brings to the new reconstructive task the critical or analysing intellect inherited from the Enlightenment, the faculty which rejects tradition. But he brings also a new creative or synthesizing faculty to which the romanticists gave the name of imagination. It was when superior individuals of eighteenth-century intellect discovered in themselves the new imaginative faculty that they became romanticists. It was when, confronted with a world rendered meaningless by the Enlightenment, they discovered in themselves the will and capacity to transform the world and give it meaning that they embarked on the reconstructive task of the nineteenth century. The new Mythos was to be made out of their imaginative insights into the three main aspects of reality—the past, nature and the self.

In describing through the thin disguise of Teufelsdröckh's autobiography his own intellectual transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, Carlyle shows how the romantic quality of mind grows out of a total crisis of personality. He tells us what it was like to have arrived at the dead-end of the eighteenth century, to inhabit the mechanical universe of the Newtonian world-view, a universe without so much moral



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meaning as would render it even hostile. “‘You cannot so much as believe in a Devil,’” he makes Teufelsdröckh complain. “‘To me,’” Teufelsdröckh continues in the best-known passage of *Sartor*, “‘the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb.’” The problem was not merely intellectual. The inability to find meaning in the world leads to the inability to respond, to feel: “‘Almost since earliest memory I had shed no tear.’”<sup>1</sup> It leads ultimately to the loss of desire to live.

Teufelsdröckh's period of emotional sterility has its parallel in Wordsworth's career at the point when he too arrives at the dead-end of the eighteenth century—when, having lost faith in the French Revolution and having lost through over-use of the analytic “knife” the ability to believe in anything and therefore to feel and live, he “Yielded up,” as he tells us in *The Prelude*, “moral questions in despair.” “This,” he says referring to the eighteenth-century disease of analysis,

was the crisis of that strong disease,  
This the soul's last and lowest ebb. (XI, 305-07)<sup>2</sup>

The same crisis occurs in the career of even such a rationalist as John Stuart Mill at the point when, “in a dull state of nerves,” he asked himself in his *Autobiography* the question that tests the value of his eighteenth-century radicalism. “‘Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?’” The answer, he realizes, is “‘No!’” Whereupon “my heart sank . . . I seemed to have nothing left to live for.”

The first break in Mill's period of emotional sterility came when he found himself able to shed tears over an affecting passage in a volume of memoirs. “From this moment my burthen grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hope-

<sup>1</sup> Bk. II, Chap. VII, pp. 164-65.

<sup>2</sup> 1850 Text. See also Bks. XII and XIII, “Imagination and Taste, How Impaired and Restored.”