

## Foundational Text Review

For our new 'Foundational Text' review series, we are asking writers to revisit a foundational contribution to Victorian studies published between 1950 and the present. How has it been built on, nuanced, and challenged by subsequent scholarship? Is it still a 'game-changer'? If you would like to contribute to this review series, the BAVS Newsletter team would love to hear from you at [bavsnews@gmail.com](mailto:bavsnews@gmail.com)! You will find a list of suggested books on the [Newsletter webpage](#), but any and all ideas are very welcome. Reviewers must be a [BAVS member](#).

***The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, by Robert Langbaum (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 246pp.**

It is impossible to write seriously about the dramatic monologue without reference to Robert Langbaum's approach to the form as hinging on the tension between sympathy and judgement. With this formulation, introduced in *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, Langbaum broke new ground. '[N]o one has quite known what to do with the dramatic monologue except to classify it', he himself noted, and such classifications 'close doors where they ought to open them' (p. 75). Langbaum's own work has done the opposite: his formulation has been productive not only of a sustained critical engagement with and interest in the dramatic monologue, but also of an ongoing critical debate about the relation between and the applicability and validity of the ideas he introduced. As happens so often with successful critical ideas, Langbaum's definition of the dramatic monologue is nowadays rarely considered in the context of the wider argument he attempted to make in his book. To do so is both alienating and enlightening: it can help to better understand the conditions as well as the limitations of Langbaum's approach to the dramatic monologue, while bringing us upfront with some of the many ways in which what we do, how we write, and what we think we know as literary critics have changed over the last seventy-five years.

In 1957, when Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* was first published, Victorian poetry was not a popular field of academic study. Thus, this book, which was centrally concerned with what has come to be recognised as one of the most characteristic innovations of Victorian poetry and whose main protagonist was Robert Browning, carefully avoided mentioning the word 'Victorian'. Rather, the wider aim of *The Poetry of Experience* was to demonstrate continuities between Romanticism and Modernism, and though the main arguments rest on the case of the dramatic monologue, Langbaum took this form to be paradigmatic not for a particular Victorian moment but for all serious post-Enlightenment, i.e. in

his terms Romantic, literature. Langbaum painted with a very broad historical brush: there is, he claimed, a poetry of meaning and a poetry of experience, the former is characteristic of all poetry before the late eighteenth century, the other arises as a Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment. In the poetry of meaning, 'the poet talks, as in ordinary discourse, either about himself or other things, treating his topic in either case as an abstraction from experience, as an object complete with its own meaning'. In the poetry of experience, in contrast, 'the poet talks about himself and other things, finding his meaning in neither but evolving it through an interchange and final fusion between the two' (p. 232).

Langbaum argued that the Romantic poets reacted against the scientific abstraction that had characterised the Enlightenment by stressing the primacy of perception. His further development of this thought serves to clarify the central role the dramatic monologue takes in his system:

But why should immediate experience yield a living reality? Because the act of knowing spontaneously and completely is an act of imaginative projection into the external object, an act of identification with the object; so that the living consciousness perceived in the object is our own. If, in other words, the act of knowing analytically requires that we 'murder' the object, treating it as something unlike ourselves, something unalive; the act of knowing organically requires that we imbue the object with life, finding in it the counterpart of our own consciousness. (pp. 24–25)

This act of projection, of role-playing, in which our sympathetic involvement with the object becomes a source of knowledge which does not depend on external criteria, but which arises from experience itself, provides the framework for Langbaum's approach to the dramatic monologue and led him to claim that this Victorian poetic form is 'the articulation of a form potential in romantic poetry from the start' (p. 79). In reading a dramatic monologue, Langbaum argued, our moral judgement, that is external criteria, has to be suspended while we

sympathetically project ourselves into the position of the speaker, in order to 'derive meaning [...] from the poetic material itself rather than from an external standard of judgment' (pp. 78–79).

This is the central argument which Langbaum revisited from different perspectives and with reference to different material in all his chapters. His first chapter offered a discussion of the poetry of the Romantic poets, Wordsworth in particular. He then turned, in Chapter 2, to the dramatic monologue, for which Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' (1842) served as the prototype. Chapter 3 offered an extended discussion of Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69) as a Relativist poem, while Chapter 4 returned to a broader consideration of the dramatic monologue in contradistinction to the soliloquy. Chapter 5 sought to apply the insight about the Romantic turn to experience to nineteenth-century receptions of Shakespeare, arguing that a psychologising reading of Shakespeare is anachronistic but inevitable in the post-Enlightenment condition. With Chapter 6, focusing on what Langbaum called 'the lyric element', he once more returned to the dramatic monologue, this time to stress what he considered the superfluity and excess of utterance characterising these poems. He concluded with a final chapter contrasting this new poetics of experience and character with the older, Aristotelian poetics of action, proposing that 'it is largely the victory of character over action that distinguishes the high literature of modern times' (p. 210).

The obvious problems with Langbaum's broad historical simplification culminate in his rather self-defeating claim that ultimately dramatic monologues 'all mean the same thing – the greatest possible surge of life' (p. 208). If that were true, what work would be left for the critic to do? What Langbaum has had to say about the dramatic monologue, however, has sparked a vibrant debate. Many of his assertions about features of the genre have since been challenged or qualified. Critics disagree with Langbaum about the importance of the auditor (Dorothy Mermin; Helen Luu) and about the role of rhetoric (Cornelia Pearsall), and the distortion resulting from his almost exclusive focus on Browning has been widely acknowledged (Glennis Byron; Patricia Riggs; Cynthia Scheinberg). But by far the most serious and most productive criticism is that which probes the ideological core of Langbaum's argument: that sympathy and judgement are functions in which all readers share equally. In a 1997 journal article on Victorian women poets, Cynthia Scheinberg was the first to highlight the masculinist bias in Langbaum's claim that 'we' sympathise with the murdering duke of 'My Last Duchess'. As Glennis Byron summarises: 'The difficulty lies in [Langbaum's] assumption of some

universalised reader, in his failure to acknowledge that sympathy and judgement will always be predicated as much, if not more, upon the reader's specific cultural, historical and social identity as on the language and strategies of the poem itself.<sup>1</sup> As such, Langbaum's study is a prime example by which to understand a sea-change in academic attitudes: a blithe certainty in the identity of the critical reader (male, white) is replaced by an awareness of the individual situatedness of the critical reader and their perspective. Still, Scheinberg does not reject Langbaum's basic terms, sympathy and judgement, but adapts them: 'rather than splitting the reader's capacities for sympathy and judgment, dramatic monologues by both men and women work to reveal the contingency between powers of poetic sympathy and moral judgement.'<sup>2</sup> These terms have simply become too widely used, and too useful to dispense with, in discussions of the dramatic monologue.

And yet, I think that returning to Langbaum's original proposition may also reveal an even more fundamental shift in attitudes towards what literature is and does, beyond the expectable gender bias. Langbaum saw the dramatic monologue as the ultimate realisation of a Romantic project of experience. 'Each encounter with the external world', he proposed, 'gives us a chance to project ourselves sympathetically into the Other and, by identifying there another aspect of the spiritual Self, to evolve a soul or identity' (p. 50). For Langbaum, it seems, the encounter with different perspectives the dramatic monologue excels in staging is only a route to the self, just as the speaker of the dramatic monologue, in Langbaum's ultimate analysis, 'reaches his apotheosis of perception and self-perception, becoming more himself than ever only to dissolve his own particularity and the particularity of what he sees in the general stream of being' (p. 209). Langbaum's belief in the universalising effect of literature, where today we tend to emphasise difference, and his apparent conviction that it is literature's task to evolve the self in the encounter with alterity, rather than to posit the incommensurability of self and other or to question the viability of any concept of self, renders the intellectual distance which separates *The Poetry of Experience* from today most palpable and most provoking.

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- 1 Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 22.
- 2 Cynthia Scheinberg, 'Recasting "sympathy and judgment": Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue', *Victorian Poetry*, 35.2 (1997), 173–91 (p. 179).