

TRADITION AND EXPERIMENT
IN ENGLISH POETRY

Also by Philip Hobsbaum

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EXPERIMENT
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Philip Hobsbaum

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For my dear wife, Rosemary
anima candida

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'A tradition is the body of texts and interpretations current among a group of writers at a given time and place'—J. V. Cunningham.

'In dealing with individual poets the critic, whether explicitly or not, is dealing with tradition, for they live in it. And it is in them that tradition lives'—F. R. Leavis.

PREFACE

Tradition and Experiment was conceived as an attempt to write an informal history of poetry in English. Existing accounts leave room for a work which is neither bedevilled with names of scant literary significance nor selective to the point where it ceases to be history at all. The present survey begins with *Piers Plowman* in the fourteenth century and comes up to the present with a final chapter on those poets whom the author believes to be the major figures of the mid-twentieth century.

Necessarily, this involves some foreshortening. Of the twelve chapters, four deal with individual poets—Langland, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth. A further chapter, centring on Ben Jonson, compares the work of this poet with that of his successors in the seventeenth century—in lyric poetry, in descriptive verse, in satire, in comedy of manners. The book is arranged in roughly chronological order, but a chapter on the rise of the dramatic monologue covers almost the entire historical range in demonstrating how this highly distinctive form grew out of the decadence of English drama. And a chapter on American verse seeks to demonstrate that America has developed a literary tradition of its own, involving Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Lowell as much as Whitman, who in many ways must be regarded as its founder.

The concept of tradition in this book is the key theme that links its several chapters together. The basic form in English is that of *Piers Plowman*: narrative verse in a highly alliterative idiom; and it is surprising how constant this métier has been.

Whole alien tracts of subject-matter—Homer's *Odyssey*, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*—have been assimilated into the characteristically English verse of poets such as Chapman and Harington. The mistake, as I see it, has been to imitate from time to time the style, as well as the subject-matter, of foreign modes; and this is what, in the book, is termed 'experiment'. Thus Chaucer, for all his command of native idiom, introduced a large number of novel verse forms into English and so left the door open for the Italianising tendencies of Spenser and the Elizabethan sonneteers generally. And they, in their turn, begin a by-line in English verse that includes Milton, Tennyson, Housman and the wave of Imagism that is upon us today. In much the same way, some damage was done to English verse by too close an imitation in the 1930s of the American idiom as evidenced in such poets as Eliot and Pound. The claim put forward is that the central line of English poetry—the tradition, so to speak—is earthy, alliterative, colloquial, with a strong regard for structure and the claims of plot. It is no accident that these are the characteristics of the central figures of this book.

Ancillary to this is the question of the way in which these great poets have been presented to the public. The chapters concerning *Piers Plowman*, Wordsworth and Whitman raise issues of scholarship, particularly in the matter of selecting and editing the relevant texts. Inferior texts and uncertainty of selection have considerably muffled the impact made by these poets upon their audience, and the comparison and analysis which brings out the inferiority of alternative readings and editions is an attempt to demonstrate the excellence of their work at its best.

Needless to say, no work on English poetry can be simply that, and so the counter-influence of other forms of literature must be acknowledged, indeed often analysed. Thus, Restoration comedy is a presence in the Jonson chapter; the medieval sermon takes its rightful place in the chapter on Langland; George Eliot, Hardy and Lawrence make their appearance in the Wordsworth chapter; and the chapter on the dramatic monologue takes into its purview the decline of tragedy from the Jacobean to the Romantics.

I hope that *Tradition and Experiment* will prove of service to the university student in providing guidelines through what must often seem to be the bewildering proliferation of poetry in English. I also hope that it will assist the general reader

by indicating that the development of our literature has been very much the product of a creative tension between the native idiom and the imitation of European forms.

Acknowledgments are due to the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, the *British Journal of American Studies*, the *Hudson Review*, *The Listener*, the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the *Poetry Review* and *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, in which earlier versions of several chapters appeared.

As I said in *A Theory of Communication*, sister-book to the present enterprise, my debts are few but crucial. To my Head of Department, Peter Butter, who obtained for me a sabbatical year without which I would still be writing this work. To the British Library, Scottish National Library and Glasgow University Library, together with their devoted staffs. To the secretaries who, over the years, typed and retyped successive drafts of various chapters, especially Valerie Eden and Ingrid Swanson; and to Janice Bell, who undertook the typing of the final draft. And my greatest debt of all, to my dear wife Rosemary, dedicatee of this book: *anima qualem neque candidiorem terra tulit, neque cui me sit devinctior alter.*

Glasgow, 1968-77