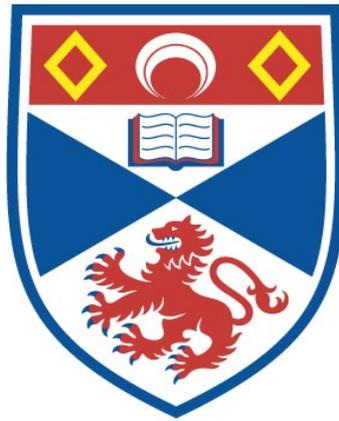


BROWNING IN THE 1830s

Sarah Heald

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St Andrews



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SARAH HEALD

M. Phil

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ABSTRACT Browning in the 1830s

The thesis concentrates on Browning's three long poems of the 1830s. Each is looked at individually, with the emphasis on Sordello, which is by far the most complex.

These poems share certain themes, through the development of which Browning's poetic maturation may be seen. All three are centrally concerned with individual quest, towards idealistic but unrealistic goals, in which the protagonists explore their inner selves. In Pauline, this quest is largely towards self-knowledge; the exploration is complicated but disorganized; this may be justified on grounds of psychological realism, but the poem's two characters do not interact. Formal dialogue in Paracelsus renders this exploration more accessible to the reader, but at the expense of the psychological realism afforded by Pauline's narrator. Paracelsus, though, takes the reader further in understanding why the protagonist has failed and how he might succeed. In Sordello, the quest is complicated by the attention paid to the complex historical background of 12th and 13th century Italy, events from which affect the protagonist's motivation. Other characters are given substance, and real interaction is seen between them. The reader sees Sordello through their eyes, as well as through those of a narrator who himself moves in and out of the action. The poem itself provides a bridge between earlier Romantic ideals and the exploration of the implications of these ideals in real people in a real and troubled world.

The aim of the thesis is to provide an introduction to these difficult poems in their own right and to show how Browning develops through them.

Preface

The thesis originated as a commentary on Sordello, but, with the publication of the first two volumes of Ian Jack's Oxford Edition of Browning in 1983 and 1984, a certain amount of the critical work I had started was overtaken. As a result, I changed the emphasis of the thesis. Instead of working exclusively on Sordello, I widened the thesis to provide an account of some aspects of the three long poems written in the 1830s. What follows is, therefore, offered principally as a commentary rather than a thoroughgoing critical account of Browning in the 1830s.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank several friends who have offered me encouragement and support as I studied for, and wrote this thesis, in particular Neil Rhodes for his invaluable criticism of parts of the text, and Catherine Wright, Yvonne Mallett, Rosemarie Morgan, Adam Alexander and my parents, Joan and Dick Heald. St. Andrews University gave me the time to complete the thesis, while employed as a full-time teacher in a very different field. I am greatly indebted to the typist at the Touchstone Press, who painstakingly worked his way through my handwriting. Most of all, I am grateful to Phillip Mallett, my supervisor, who suggested the essence of the research topic, and who has been constantly supportive and inspiring over the years. He always restored my interest in the topic at times when I was discouraged, and has given me long hours of discussion about these baffling poems, as well as penetrating criticism of my own writing.

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Browning Chronology to 1840

- 1812 Browning born (7 May) at Southampton Street, Camberwell
- 1814 Sarianna born (7 January)
- c1824 Incondita submitted to publishers, unsuccessfully
- 1826 Browning reads Voltaire, Shelley and Keats
Hazlitt: Plain Speaker
- 1828-9 Attends some lectures at London University,
soon abandoning them
- 1830 Tennyson: Poems chiefly Lyrical
Moore: Life of Byron
Lyell: Principles of Geology
Death of Hazlitt
July Revolution
Cholera epidemic
- 1831 Mill: The Spirit of the Age
Peacock: Crotchet Castle
- 1832 Pauline conceived
Tennyson: Poems
Mill: On Genius
Deaths of Scott, Bentham and Crabbe
Reform Act
- 1833 Pauline published. Browning reads Mill's criticisms
of the poem
Begins Sordello
Carlyle: Sartor Resartus
Mill: 'What is poetry?'; 'The Two Kinds of Poetry'
Deaths of A.H.Hallam and Wilberforce
Factory Act
Abolition of Slavery
- 1834 Browning goes to St.Petersburg (March and April)
Begins Paracelsus
Deaths of Coleridge, Irving, Lamb and Malthus
New Poor Law
- 1834/5 Johannes Agricola and Porphyria's Lover written
Carlyle finishes the first volume of The French Revolution

- 1835 **Paracelsus published**
 Mill reviews Tennyson
 Death of Mrs Hemans and Cobbett
 Municipal Reform Act
- 1836 **Browning meets Wordsworth and Landor (26 May);
 invited by Macready to write a play**
 Mill: Civilization
 Dickens: Pickwick Papers
 Death of Godwin
- 1837 **Strafford published and performed five times**
 Mrs Busk's Sordello published
 Carlyle: The French Revolution, reviewed by Mill in July
 Dickens: Oliver Twist
- 1838 **Browning's first visit to Italy**
 Dickens: Nicholas Nickleby
 Mill: 'On Alfred de Vigny' and 'On Bentham'
- 1839 Birmingham Riots
 Royal Commission on Police
 First Factory Inspectors' Act
- 1840 **Sordello published**
 Dickens: Old Curiosity Shop;
Barnaby Rudge
 Mill: 'On Coleridge'
 Carlyle's lectures: On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the
 Heroic in History begin in May

A Note on the Texts

Throughout the thesis, I have used the Oxford Edition, The Poetical Works of Robert Browning edited by Ian Jack and Margaret Smith, Volumes 1 and 2 (Oxford, 1983 and 1984 respectively), I have referred to the 1888 version of Pauline on the grounds that the punctuation is in general clearer, but apart from that, any significant differences between the 1833 and 1888 versions are few. I have noted such differences where they appear in the context of the thesis. For references to Browning's later poems, I have used Browning: Poetical Works 1833 - 1864 edited by Ian Jack (Oxford, 1975). I have made occasional reference to the notes in The Complete Works of Robert Browning Volume 11 edited by Roma A. King, Jr, et al (Ohio, 1970).

For convenience, I have used certain abbreviations as appropriate in the text:

Para = Paracelsus

OE = The Poetical Works of Robert Browning ed. Ian Jack and Margaret Smith (Oxford, 1983 and 1984)

TA = 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth.

AM = 'The Ancient Mariner', Coleridge.

CR = 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', Browning.

INTRODUCTION

The years leading up to and including those in which Browning was writing Sordello were seen by the major writers of the period, such as Mill, Carlyle and Hazlitt, as restless and unsettled. It was a time of social and political unrest.

There were people alive who had vivid memories of the French Revolution; and everyone was aware of the riots and the rick-burnings which arose from the agricultural depression in the years following Waterloo. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, the Reform Act of 1832, widening the franchise to include most of the middle class and a few of the more prosperous working class, and the New Poor Law Act of 1834, were all political measures about which feelings ran high. Questions of public morality were kept to the fore, with the messages of the Evangelicals and Utilitarians, while the Abolition of Slavery was effected in 1833. The demand for more political change was maintained by the Anti-Corn Law League, and by the Chartists, whose protests came to a head in the (non-violent) march and Birmingham riots of 1839. A change was taking place in what could be expressed publicly; Dr Bowdler expurgated Shakespeare in 1818, and by 1847, the Economist would not go into the details of the Public Health Bill since to do so would mean including unpleasant words.

A poet in such an age might be expected to deal with current social and political issues. However he was also the inheritor of the Romantic poets' sensibility, accustomed to making high claims for poetry and for the function of the poet. Given that such claims called for the poet to be an unacknowledged legislator of the world, a new poet might well be self-conscious about his position when the acknowledged legislators were so active. How could a thinker and speaker-out of essential, but perhaps impracticable truths, operate in a time of such intense practical activity? Out of such a question we may see the germs of Pauline, in which the narrator seeks a positive identity for himself,

Paracelsus where the protagonist attempts to find his own ideal knowledge, rejecting the areas of accessible knowledge to do so, and Sordello in which we see a character trying to develop as poet in a time of turmoil, trying to reconcile his poetic and political aspirations.

As in Sordello's situation, a poet in the 1830s might be anxious lest the kind of knowledge to which he believed he had access might be dismissed as superfluous to his time. This very subject was a frequent topic among the critics of the day. Hazlitt, in his essay on Coleridge,¹ says regretfully that the age is one 'of talkers and not of doers'. His disapproval becomes more apparent when he praises Godwin above Coleridge since he has been far more productive with his lesser talents. However, he wishes to excuse Coleridge, whom he does admire, with his explanation for this state of affairs, 'that the world is growing old'. Mill, in his Spirit of the Age essays in 1831,² is more concerned with analysing what it is that makes the age one 'of talkers', and confused talkers at that. In a 'transitional' age, he says, 'Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones'. The dominant idea of this particular age is the discussion of its own spirit, a quite unprecedented self-consciousness, the very term 'spirit of the age' not being 'met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity'.

In so unsettled a period, a new leader or school of thought needs to be recognised by the majority before the world can regain its former equilibrium. Carlyle is obsessed with defining what qualities are needed to constitute a man worthy to be followed by the majority.³ For Carlyle, the leader must be 'heroic' in the sense that he derives his strength from living in daily communion with the 'Inner Fact of things'; Hazlitt, echoing 'Tintern Abbey', praises the art of painting since the painter can see 'into the Life of Things'.⁴ If a man sees truly, says Carlyle, he cannot prevent himself being sincere, and therefore others must recognise that he is worthy to be

followed. The poet in his view is more than the 'unacknowledged legislator'; he should, like the prophet, be followed by all capable of rational thought.⁵

In an age of transition though, argues Mill,⁶ many apparently authoritative voices emerge and in such an age one cannot decide between them. Carlyle, from his rather different view point, also speaks of the way in which the 'vates' may face opposition - his most extreme examples in Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History being the careers of Mahammet, Luther and Knox. For Carlyle, there is little difference in the essential qualities of any kind of 'hero', whether warrior, priest or poet. 'Given a great soul', he states, 'Open to the Divine significance of Life, then there is a man fit to speak of this, to sing of this, to fight and work for this, in a great, victorious, enduring manner...'⁷ The poet may concentrate on aesthetic beauty rather than morality but if he is to be great, he must be more than just a poet; the whole man must be great. For this he must see into what Goethe describes as the 'open secret'; the poet and prophet may be associated in Carlyle by the use of the word 'vates' since 'they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the universe'.⁸ True poetry is that which is 'spoken by a mind that has penetrated into the heart of the thing, detected the inmost mystery of it, namely the melody that lies hidden in it'.⁹ There is an assumption here that harmony lies at the core of truth rather than discord or even flatness, an assumption to be challenged by Browning in such poems as 'Childe Roland to the dark tower came' where the truth is nothing more than the knowledge that flatness may exist at the centre of discovery. For Carlyle, however, music is 'a kind of inarticulate unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of the Infinite, and lets us for moments gaze into that!'¹⁰ In Wordsworth, if one retains the freshness of vision of a blessed child, one may still perceive something of the 'eternal silence':¹¹

Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never

(Intimations of Immortality, 155-7)

The tiniest detail may lead to the heart of emotional vision:

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears
(Intimations of Immortality, 203-4)

For Wordsworth, the human heart is able in a particular state to aspire to this kind of sensitivity; in Carlyle, the poet, with his ability to express this kind of perception, is almost god-like; if we do not now think of great men as literally divine, suggests Carlyle, it is only because our ideas of God are always rising higher. In Sordello, Browning both follows Carlyle and also brings this optimistic view of poet as vates into question. When Sordello is introduced, he is presented with the potential to be a poet entirely in keeping with Carlyle's definition:

a soul fit to receive
Delight at every sense
(Sordello, 1, 465-6)

with

the finer dress
Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness
At eye and ear
(Sordello, 1, 477-9)

Sordello seems to confirm this potential when, after his victory over Eglamor, he asserts that if people heard:

"Just those two rhymes, assented at my word,
"And loved them as I love them who have run
"These fingers through those pale locks, let the sun
"Into the white cool skin - who first could clutch,
"Then praise - I needs must be a god to such.
(Sordello, 11, 156-60)

The words 'to such', referring to those in agreement with Sordello, give us a clue to the author's attitude; as the poem continues we see that, to Browning, the poet is

emphatically not a god.

Carlyle, so much more idealistic, concedes that the world can affect the manner, if not the matter, of the poet, notably in the eighteenth century. In so sceptical an age, he proclaims, the possibility of 'Heroism' is 'formally abnegated in the minds of all'.¹² The 'spiritual paralysis' of the times comes from 'fatal misery' for the writer, who is forced to dilute his insight with scepticism if he is to succeed at all in the world. Browning seems parallel to Carlyle here in Sordello; Carlyle's acknowledgement of the possibility of some failure for even the true poet is relevant to Sordello, whose ability to create ceases altogether when the world's demands become too oppressive.

The demands on any poet of the 1830's would have been oppressive. Quite apart from the tremendous public interest in literary matters and the interest in what constituted a great man, as instanced by the sheer size of the audience for Carlyle's 1840 lectures, there was a need for new, strong voices to fill the void left by the early deaths of the three younger Romantic poets, Keats, Shelley and Byron, while Wordsworth seemed to have lapsed into quiet at this point and Coleridge had died in 1834.

Browning as a young man became immersed in Byron, Shelley and Keats. Twenty years after his first reading of Byron, he wrote to Elizabeth, 'I always retained my first feeling for Byron in many respects...I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves'.¹³ In 1826, Browning was given Shelley's Miscellaneous Poems by his cousin. William Irvine and Park ^{Howan} put well Browning's feelings about Shelley: '...here he found not only his own world and time, but his own thoughts and feelings, even his own dreams and experiences, expressed with quite breathtaking and unfamiliar freshness and beauty'.¹⁴ Shelley was much like the young Browning, as seen for example in Pauline, deeply concerned with his own inward vision and insight, seeing this kind of vision as important for his contemporaries.¹⁵ Browning's mother gave him three

volumes of Keats as well as the requested Shelley for his birthday. The tracing of the narrator's progress through various degrees of belief and its lack in Pauline is possibly a memory of Browning's own atheist phase following his first reading of Shelley. Quite apart from the personal impact on him of these poets, a young ambitious poet entering the vacuum left by these early deaths, would have felt rather similar to Brahms after the death of Beethoven, when he delayed the production of his first symphony. There was a public interest in the nature of poetry, and what constituted a poet but no living poet in whom such qualities could be seen. Thomas Hood could not well be said to fill the gap, and the sort of 'Sordello' written by Mrs Busk bears scant comparison with Browning's, which point I will return to later.

Coleridge's definition of poetic imagination could be seen as perhaps the most challenging for any young poet. The primary imagination he calls 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'. The secondary he considers 'as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create',¹⁶ which is exactly what Sordello is seen as attempting to do with his language. The association in writers like Coleridge, as in Carlyle, of the poetic imagination with power, ability to re-create perception, intuition, must have placed a great burden on Browning and Tennyson during the writing of their early poetry.

The subject matter chosen by Browning reflects this burden along with the self-consciousness of the 1830's. The protagonists of Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello strive to reach some inexpressible ideal without the practical means to do so. Paracelsus has the sense of being singled out by God but no real idea of the means of praise, as Festus tells him. Here, we see a contrast with the description of

a similar sense of being chosen, in Wordsworth's The Prelude;
he says:

to the open fields I told
A prophecy: poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services

(The Prelude, 1, 59-63)

Wordsworth sees the poet as having been given the means to praise in 'poetic numbers'. In Paracelsus, as Festus sees, the means to praise are not given with the desire to seek. Pauline's narrator strives for self-knowledge and self-fulfilment but this evades him at each attempt. Sordello appears to have the potential for poetic intuition in the Carlylean or Coleridgean sense, but, following his first spontaneous outpouring that puts him over the technically accomplished Eglamor, his inability to use language in a way that will communicate his perceptions causes his disillusionment and failure. As no doubt any poet had to discover, and with the more difficulty following Romantic optimism, pure instinct is not enough. The sense that a poet has access to some kind of a divine spark was not lost however; as late as 1857, Elizabeth Barrett's Aurora Leigh, having rejected popular stuff, says of her 'veritable work':

And as the soul
Which grows within a child makes the child grow, -
Or as the fiery sap, the touch from God,
Careering through a tree, dilates the bark
And roughs with scale and knob, before it strikes
The summer foliage out in a green flame -
So life, in deepening with me, deepened all
The course I took, the work I did.

(Aurora Leigh, 111, 328-35)

Browning may have felt he had access to this kind of insight, but his three main poems of the 1830s show the sort of doubts he was likely to have experienced; what if his audience did

not accept him? What if he could not actually put his perceptions into thoughts? The poet supposedly exudes poetry, but in what form?

Much as Coleridge had distinguished between imagination and fancy in Biographia Literaria, Mill, in his essay on The Two Kinds of Poetry, distinguishes between eloquence and true poetry; the poet perceives in his imagination and uses thought to put his insight into words; the eloquent man thinks and then seeks images with which to clothe his thought. In the poet who is not completely genuine, 'the thought itself is still the conspicuous object; while the poetry of a poet is Feeling itself, employing Thought only as the medium of its utterance'.¹⁷ Pauline's narrator fails in his attempt to find a positive self when he tries paths not true to himself; when Sordello's imagination lapses, it is partly because he attempts to use the language of others. He fails utterly; trying so hard to put whole (inner) perception into words, he loses the original thought. This is because no words can express adequately his insights, but only distort them. The language becomes dissociated from his original insight, which is thus lost. When Sordello starts to perceive himself as parts of a whole, a man-half with desires and inclinations of the world, and a poet-half superior to the man-half, the two halves in conflict with each other, he cannot succeed in being the poet that his audience demands.

In inheriting and questioning the Romantic legacy concerning the poet's role, Browning is unsurprisingly concerned to present his protagonists with greater psychological realism than the Romantics had. In the presentation of Sordello's perception of himself as divided into a 'man'^{half} and a 'poet' half we see an example of how he goes about this. The distinction is complex and we are not invited to see it as valid outside Sordello's mind. What is valid, and important, is that we see how an individual's perception of his problems affects his feelings about himself. We are told that the 'perplexity' (Sordello, 11, 708) here is Sordello's; he has been struggling internally to be one being and this effort

'frittered him incessantly piecemeal' (Sordello, 11, 695). This perplexity gets in the way of real advance of his art and, when asked to sing by the Mantuans, he is able merely to copy the techniques of others:

The obvious if not only shelter lay
In deeds, the dull conventions of his day
Prescribed the like of him

(Sordello, 11, 709-11)

Browning's interest in split personalities had started years before Sordello; Eliza Flower observed in 1833, 'If he had not got into the habit of talking of head and heart as two separate existences, one would say that he was born without a heart'.¹⁸ In other ways, Sordello is in line with Carlyle; as we have seen, Carlyle says that in the eighteenth century, the genius had to compromise his vision to be recognised. In Sordello, when living in a world peopled by Naddo's commonsensical associates, the poet's intensity cannot easily stand against the feeling of the times.

The relationship of the poet or inspired being with his audience and contemporaries is a central concern throughout these poems, as is the relationship of imagination, fancy and reality. The way in which Browning develops these amid his experimentation with style and a growing sense that the poet should be of use in the world, marks the distinction between what we think of as Romantic and Victorian thought.

In these poems a sense is developed that mere utterance of deep insight is not enough; that insight, as in the destructive dreams described by Pauline's narrator, might be of use only to show paths to avoid. It might, as in Paracelsus, not be capable of being fulfilled, or in Sordello, of being expressed in any language able to be understood by others - even if it could be fully expressed in language.

--o--

It is in his chosen use of language that critics of Browning have found perhaps most difficulty - particularly in Sordello, which could be called the peak-point of his 1830s poems, before Browning turned to his terser style, found in the 1830s in 'Porphyria's Lover'. Sordello may be extremely puzzling but, in considering it and other difficult poems of Browning's, critics have seen it as a substantial, important poem. Lionel Stevenson goes so far as to refer to it in a title as 'The Key Poem of the Victorian Age'. Browning confused his contemporaries too in his complexity of language. On 2nd December 1855, Ruskin wrote to Browning: 'You are worse than the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed. Bright, and deep enough truly, but so full of Clefs that half the journey has to be done with ladder and hatchet'. Browning's reply indicated a method by which we may still enjoy, if not fully understand, his poetry: 'You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to ledge of my "glaciers", as you call them; not stand poking your alpenstock into the holes, and demonstrating that no foot could have stood there; - suppose it sprang over there?'¹⁹ Ruskin's approach to the harder passages in Browning we see from this to have been far more penetrating than the pre-Raphaelites, who were more interested in the pictorial qualities in Sordello; E. Gosse, who shared this approach, found in Sordello 'passages of melody and insight, fresh enough, surprising enough to form the whole stock-in-trade of a respectable poet'.²⁰

It is possible that the language of Sordello might not have become so condensed, had it not been for the appearance, in early 1837, of the Plays and Poems of Mrs Busk which contained a 'Sordello' which is easy-reading in the extreme. It makes no attempt to enter into Sordello's situation, and glosses slickly over ideas awkward for the reading public to allow, for instance, of ^{the} Sordello and Cuniza's (the 'Palma' of Browning's poem) (relationship):

Enough to know that health's glad hue
Brightens again Cuniza's cheek,
Whilst her late tearful eyes bespeak

In all their former radiancy,
Felicity deep-seated, true
To know, that in Verona fair,
Sordello, evermore abiding
Chief favorite of her princely pair,
At first in popularity
Sings, if no longer lays of love,
The pure and holy joys they prove,
Who all the tenderness residing
In woman's chaste and constant bosom share

(Sordello, Mrs Busk, XXV)

As Donald Thomas describes it, following this publication, Browning set about writing Sordello for the third time, 'putting as much distance as possible between his own and the style and subject matter of his rival. Mrs Busk's poem was vacuous, melodious, as lightly ornamental as embroidery. Therefore, Browning must be historical, intellectual and violent'.²¹ His contemporaries found this hard to accept; as Donald Thomas says: 'an age accustomed to the transparent ease of Hood, Mrs Hemans or the young Tennyson regarded the compression and energy of such writing as wilful obscurity'.²²

The ideas in Wordsworth and the Romantics may sometimes have been hard to understand, but on the whole the language used was accessible, that of 'a man speaking to men'.²³ In Browning's first three long poems, we find arguably realistic representations of people musing, but the thought is far less accessible to the reader. In this representation of thought as it actually occurs, Browning seems to be attempting something quite new, and this is seen in the rambling nature of the retrospective tale of Pauline's lover or, more sophisticatedly, when Sordello is seen musing to himself, or to others. The difficulty of language in Browning appears to be connected with the desire, previously stated, for greater psychological realism than found in the Romantics. In order to catch a character's thoughts as they occur, change, and even reject their forms of expression at the time of being spoken, Browning's

language becomes complex and, at times, unclear. The narrator is not invested with the authority with which Wordsworth may speak out. Wordsworth, believing in his own visions, must communicate them as clearly as possible. In Sordello the reader may well not understand the narrator as he wanders through his own thoughts in the second half of Book Three for example. The lack of clarity seems appropriate in a narrator uncertain of his own role; at the poem's opening we see how hesitant he is in his choice of audience; if he is not allowed a live audience, he will summon the dead, but the member of his audience, Shelley, who seems too bright for comfort, he sends away. He is not certain to whom he is speaking - we are told in the first line to decide if we will (or will not) hear Sordello's story told. Tucker provides one explanation for this: 'The metrical bumps and semantic twists of Browning's pious style express, and labor to create in his reader, the poet's faith that the range of human possibilities knows no ultimate bound and that the properly human attitude is therefore one of anticipation'.²⁴ Realistic representation of thought is seen in the description of what is going on in Sordello's mind following Eglamor's singing where both mood and thought in the mood in which he thought it are described in detail:

Sordello's brain

Swam; for he knew a sometime deed again;
So, could supply each foolish gap and chasm
The minstrel left in his enthusiasm,
Mistaking its true version - was the tale
Not of Apollo? Only, what avail
Luring her down, that Elys an he pleased,
If the man dared no further? Has he ceased?

(Sordello, 11, 71-8)

Sordello's impatience comes out through the short sentences and question marks, and his anticipatory excitement; he is about to supply the gaps. We later see Sordello's more frivolous thoughts, and how they encroach on the serious:

So, if he sighed, as formerly

Because the merry time of life must fleet,
'T was deeper now, - for could the crowds repeat
Their poor experiences? His hand that shook
Was twice to be deplored. 'The Legate, look!
"With eyes, like fresh-blown thrush-eggs on a thread,
"Faint-blue and loosely floating in his head,
"Large tongue, moist open mouth; and this long while
"That owner of the idiotic smile
"Serves them!"

(Sordello, IV, 281-90)

This is the kind of touch that can make the poem difficult, quite apart from its syntactical problems, but also so psychologically convincing. It is passages like this that perhaps lead to Tucker's assertion that Browning 'at once extended the technical resources of the romantic tradition in poetry, and broadened its topical range to embrace the extraordinary romance of fancy and fact in the rich particularity of ordinary living - if not quite a new project for romantic poetry, a project Browning managed to rejuvenate by approaching it in novel ways'.²⁵ This particularity becomes arguably more pronounced in Dramatis Personae, where thought-processes are described in even more detail than in Sordello.

This technical expansion is seen not only in particularity of description but also in aspects of style new to poetry. Tucker speaks of the 'fresh prosodic roughness' and 'colloquial vigor' Browning introduces to nineteenth century verse. This kind of style is appropriately used in his 'special care' for the 'coarse, grotesquely "unpoetical" bodily life of this world'.²⁶

For an audience used to being directed to its response by the easily-read Hood for instance, the problems of syntax and irregularity of style in Browning were hard to take. In speaking of the great Romantics like Coleridge, Holloway states that these authors 'insist on how acquiring wisdom is somehow an opening of the eyes, making us see in our experience what we failed to see before'.²⁷ This is done

by modifying our perceptions, stimulating the reader to notice something to which he was previously blind, to see old things in a new way. By the time of Sordello, Browning is demanding that the reader put an enormous effort into this; he need not simply read attentively with an open mind; he must read with absolutely full attention, be prepared to sort out problems such as in which part of speech a given word is to be understood - not just once but often. It is particularly difficult in the passage in Book 11 about the 'man' and 'poet-part' of Sordello. Sometimes it is quite awkward to see to which part reference is being made. For instance, we are told it is his 'sorry self' (Sordello,11,673) who 'sauntered forth in dream' (Sordello,11,670) but the next phrase seems unclear:

who yet might be
Sorrier for aught he in reality
Achieved, so pinioned Man's the Poet-part,
Fondling, in turn of fancy, verse
(Sordello,11,673-6)

It looks as though the Poet-part pinions the man-part, since the word 'Man's' looks as if it should add 'part' and thus be seen after the 'Poet-part' - but it would make sense for man to pinion the poet this way. The poet-part may well seem to fondle verse, but verse is in place of fancy - so, again this is ambiguous. It is frequently hard to judge to which major clause a subordinate belongs. For instance, one probably needs to read this lovely passage more than once to discover that it is Elys who awaits 'you' [Sordello] at the cypress:

by thorn-rows
"Alive with lamp-flies, swimming spots of fire
"And dew, outlining the black cypress' spire
"She waits you at, Elys, who heard you first
"Woo her, the snow-month through, but ere she durst
"Answer 't was April.
(Sordello,111,104-9)

Add to syntactical ambiguities, words and obscure references such as 'Polycarp' (Sordello, 111, 999), and the patience of even the most determined reader is taxed. It is possible, as Browning recommends to Ruskin, to overleap the difficulties, landing perhaps at the lyrical start to Book 11 or the evocative description of decay in Salinguerra's garden for Retrude (Sordello, 1V, 113 seq) but the challenge in the first and last lines of the poem then remains unanswered. Stevenson describes as 'one of the most notable implications of Sordello' the fact that it 'marks the first occasion in two centuries when a poet was frankly prepared to be incomprehensible to the majority of readers'.²⁸

The reader must put real energy into the act of reading. As Stevenson asserts, the lines: 'Who will, may hear Sordello's story told' (Sordello, 1, 1) and 'Who would has heard Sordello's story told' (Sordello, VI, 886) indicate the need for more active attention than given by the readers of neo-classical or romantic poets - this is related to my earlier point that the narrator is in Browning more hesitant, more psychologically complex. Browning intends to emphasize that there is a 'strenuous co-operative relationship' between author and reader. The reader must participate in the poem if he is 'to grasp the unfamiliar and sometimes unpalatable face that is being offered to him'.²⁹ Pauline makes demands on the reader to connect, and work out the logical progression of, a series of reflections by an introverted speaker who does not even relate with his imagined listener, Pauline. Paracelsus shows in its formal dialogues the lack of real communication even between people who care for each other; the reader has to decide what makes Festus so loyal to Paracelsus; the reader has also to cope with the psychological leaps made without aid of much in the way of relevant locational knowledge. In Sordello, complicated by the complex historical background as well as for the other reasons for its difficulty, the reader's active participation is even more vital.

This is not however due to vagueness on the poet's part. From Pauline to Sordello we may see a movement from extreme vagueness (even non-existence) of setting to extreme

specificity - so much so, that what may appear of central importance to the protagonists is surrounded by local detail which detracts from what is central - much in the way local details intervene even in the most serious moments in life. Park Honan is by no means praising Sordello but does point out how we may see in it the beginnings of Browning's later monologues - which are not apparent in the vagueness of Pauline. He suggests it is the boldness of the technical experiments in Sordello that cause it to fail if it does fail. He speaks of the problems of syntax and diction, the clutter of historical details, as the 'very reverse of the Shelleyan vagueness and dreamy timelessness of Paracelsus'. In this respect he describes Sordello as 'radically experimental'. He compares Sordello to the mature monologues, pointing to Naddo's speech (Sordello, 11) as an example of the similarity between these and some passages of Sordello. The later monologues, he says, contain 'equally concrete' detail, which is, however, 'more selective'.³⁰

With more demanding - and sophisticated - language, Browning develops in psychological realism in his early poems from Pauline to Sordello. Not only in Sordello are individual speeches more precisely placed but we are given a far more detailed picture of, and reasons behind, the development of Sordello than we have of either of the previous two protagonists. In Pauline we see the narrator recalling how he moved from one aim to the next; we are given scant clue as to why, other than that he is restless and, at times, must escape his own self-destructive characteristics and, at times, feels himself more blessed than at others. In Paracelsus we see how the protagonist turns from those he loves in a typically adolescent rejection, and this is what gives him the psychological motivation to travel far away from them to seek essential truth. His realisation, eventually, that truth could as well be found in the company of loved ones, since in seeking truth he has neglected love, is part of a plausible account of motivation, but, again does not provide us with any great insight into his development other than what he himself tells us. That we know more than the speaker about the speaker is very characteristic of later

monologues. In Sordello we see a detailed picture of the emergence of an ambitious poet from ^adreaming child, and of how he reacts in different circumstances, whether to recoil from what is too much of a challenge, as in his return to Goito, or to rise to it, as when challenged by Palma to approach Salinguerra. It is more plausible in that we may believe these specific occasions have these particular effects on the character described to us. This is partly because we are witness to so much more of Sordello's thought as he thinks it. In Pauline we view the protagonist reviewing his own life - and leaving out many connecting points. In Paracelsus we see his life through a series of dialogues years apart from each other. Sordello develops psychological reality since we see the protagonist observed by others as well as himself in a variety of settings.

Through this greater psychological reality comes a naturalistic challenging of the ideals of Romanticism I have mentioned earlier in this Introduction. Romantic critical writing, and the accounts of the poetic process in Romantic poetry, confidently asserted the existence of extraordinary spiritual gifts and powers in the poet. Coleridge may himself be in despair, but this never prevents him from making vast assertions based on his own thoughts:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live

(Dejection: An Ode, 47-8)

In these poems, Browning develops a stance very different from this. He shows how genuine insight, or aspirations towards such in the case of Paracelsus, may be undermined by the kind of person the poet is, or by conflicting ideals of his own, or by his inability to express his insight in ways accessible to the language of the world. Browning's demonstrations of this in these poems show how he has entered on a different kind of quest from that of the Romantics. Harold Bloom describes how, before the 'High Romantics', quest-romance was the movement from nature to redeemed nature 'the sanction of redemption being the

gift of some external spiritual authority, sometimes magical'.³¹ With Romanticism the movement became more internalized, from nature to imagination's freedom; sometimes this freedom is reluctant 'and the imagination's freedom is frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction but destructive of the social self'.³² In 'Dejection: An Ode,' Coleridge can see the way to joy from a position of social isolation, he is extremely self-conscious. Bloom points to this kind of self-consciousness as a high cost of Romantic quest. Thus, according to Bloom, Romantics have to search to widen and intensify their consciousness, which has been shadowed by a spirit that has narrowed it into an acute preoccupation with self. It is this preoccupation that Pauline's narrator is constantly trying to escape. In Sordello, the poet's search for self-expression is complicated by his equal desire to render some good to the people. Sordello has more complex aims than just to escape his own self-consciousness. His imaginative freedom, which is akin to involuntary creation, gives way to self-consciousness, doubt, paralysis and retreat, complicated by the demands from the social world. When he leaves Goito spiritually and in actuality to sing at the contest he is completely unself-conscious. However, on his return he is neurotically self-listening, to the extent of being aware of his own pulse-beat at his brain.

The divergence of subject in these poems is a sign of departure from the Romantics with, on the whole, their convictions of the poet's role in relation to nature. Coleridge, in describing the thinking of those men impelled 'to propose their own nature as a problem', is above all, however hard it is to understand, very sure about what this entails: 'The first step was to construct a table of distinctions, which they seem to have formed on the principle of the absence of or presence of the Will. Our various sensations, perceptions and movements were classed as active or passive, or as media partaking of both'.³³ He goes on to make distinctions between the voluntary and spontaneous, the external and internal. Without saying here how far he agrees with such definitions, the impression is of certainty

that he is right. In Sordello, when the protagonist is musing on the differences between 'man'^{part} and 'poet' part for instance; we see a far vaguer debate going on. The inconclusiveness of style here leads to more complex realism in considering the position of the artist.

Along with this we see a narrator far harder to define than those of the Romantics, or earlier Browning. In 'The Ancient Mariner', from the moment we, like the wedding guest, are fixed by the glittering eye, we are in the position of having our reactions controlled by him as he tells the story. How far we are controlled by the narrator in Sordello is far more debatable; we see him in debate with Sordello himself, sometimes making Sordello appear foolish, sometimes so acidic towards Sordello that our sympathies go his [Sordello's] way instead. Sometimes narrative comment may help to dissipate the effect of caustic comment by other would-be controllers, such as Naddo. In his description of different kinds of poet, for instance, we are led first to one view and then another about Sordello, and then he leaves us to decide for ourselves, while dropping a heavy hint that all will not be well with his protagonist. Perhaps this giving of more than one viewpoint indicates the narrator's own insecurity (which his calling of his audience has already shown) and thus tells us something of Sordello's likely insecurity as poet. It also tells of his ability to see more than one side, which Sordello by contrast finds difficult. As said earlier, it is one way of attempting psychological realism. The narrator's jumping to the present in Book 111 shows us something more of the contrasts and similarities between his and Sordello's minds. His ability to control even time in the poem this way shows how far Browning has come since the 'linear' (in time) descriptions given by Pauline's narrator.

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These are just some of the ways in which Browning develops through his poetry of the 1830s. I am not able here to speak of the contrasting, and polished, 'Porphyria's Lover' or the

experiment in monologue, 'Johannes Agricola', largely because they are in such a different genre from the three long poems, though they share such themes as the quest for knowledge and possession through imagination. Strafford, though demonstrating Browning's interest in - an albeit formal - dialogue form, would also involve a sideways glance inappropriate here.

I intend to concentrate in this thesis on Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello mainly in the light of the quests they pursue and the way these are pursued. Through these poems Browning grows in his portrayal of psychological reality, and the expression of communication and its lack. This is partly since the idea of the audience in the poems becomes more complex along with a far more sophisticated portrayal of the narrator. This leads to a much more open-ended view of just what these poems were about than was possible in reading earlier Romantic poems. This obliges the reader to bring more of his own energy to the reading of Browning. By the time of Sordello, a wide variety of issues relating to the poet, his poems, his work in relation to the actual need of the world was being examined. The poem cannot be defined as having any one main message, and in this, says Stevenson, is found its significance: 'that the poem is not merely a manifesto for Browning's life's work, nor even merely the key poem of the Victorian era; as a survey of the functions and responsibilities of poetry, it still remains vitally applicable'.³⁴ This must be because it raises so many questions and areas of debate. Each reader must bring his own answers. It is this open-endedness that causes its difficulty, and its originality.

Notes

1. William Hazlitt, 'Mr Coleridge' in The Spirit of the Age (published 'anon', London, 1825)
2. J.S. Mill, 'The Spirit of the Age', The Examiner, Jan 9th - May 29th, 1831
3. Particularly in T. Carlyle, Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History. Lectures, May 1840 (Everyman, 1908 pp239-467)
4. William Hazlitt, 'On the Pleasure of Painting' ed Keynes, p.620
5. Again, see Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History especially Lecture 11, 'The Hero as Prophet': 'we must listen above all to him' (Everyman, p.281)
6. See J.S. Mill, 'The Spirit of the Age' 11: 'In an age of transition, the divisions among the instructed nullify their authority, and the uninstructed lose their faith in them'. For Mill, this thought recurred in a more private context. See his Diary, 13.1.1854: the 'multitude of thoughts only breeds increase of uncertainty'.
7. T. Carlyle, op. cit.
8. Ibid, 'The Hero as Poet', p.313
9. Ibid, p.316
10. Ibid, p.316
11. Ibid, p.316
12. T. Carlyle, op. cit., 'The Hero as a man of letters', p.398
13. See William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring and the Poet, p.14. Browning goes on to say that by contrast he would not 'get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were condensed into the little China bottle yonder' (Letter, August 22nd, 1846).
14. William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring and the Poet, p.15
15. Ibid, p.15

16. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (Everyman, p.167)
17. J.S. Mill, 'The Two Kinds of Poetry' (Monthly Repository, January 1833) Reprinted in Mill's Essays on Literature and Society ed J.B. Schneewind (New York, 1965)
18. William Irvine and Park Honan, op. cit., p.38
19. See Herbert F. Tucker, Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure, p.11
20. E. Gosse, Robert Browning, Personalialia (London, 1890)² Quoted by Donald Thomas, Robert Browning. A Life within Life p.78
21. Donald Thomas, op. cit., p.72
22. Ibid, p.78
23. William Wordsworth, Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1805), p.30
24. Herbert F. Tucker, op. cit., p.10
25. Ibid, p.3
26. Ibid, p.3
27. John Holloway, The Victorian Sage; Studies in Argument, p.9
28. Lionel Stevenson, 'The Key Poem of the Victorian Age', p.288
29. Ibid, p.288
30. Park Honan, Browning's characters: A Study in Poetic Technique, p.39
31. Harold Bloom, Romanticism and Consciousness, p.5
32. Ibid, p.6
33. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, p.54
34. Lionel Stevenson, op. cit., p.289

PAULINE

Pauline is centrally concerned with quest. First, the protagonist's life to date, up to the time of the poem, has been concerned only with his following of various paths - to good, to the ability to sing, to love. Second, in the time of the poem itself, he is seeking to analyse his past life in order to enable him to work out what his future should be. Neither the quest of his past life, nor his struggle to define that life - despite some insight into it - seem ultimately successful. One of the problems when reading Pauline is to work out what is happening at the end in terms of the protagonist's success or failure. Is it possible the author thinks the ending speaks for the protagonist's success, or does the ending show another unconvincing path he will try? Or does the ending, if indicative of the protagonist's failure, make the poem more convincing because arguably more true to real life? Mill's criticism that Pauline was merely the self-indulgent writing of a young man about himself might, in the event of our choosing the third option, turn out to be in the poem's favour. I intend to examine the poem in terms of the aspirations of the protagonist, and his success or its opposite.

As in Paracelsus and, to some degree, Sordello, the protagonist in Pauline is as interested in analysing his own life as in actually living that life. However, he is unlike Paracelsus in that he believes that his own will-power has guided his life, and even led him astray. He has only himself to praise for rare success, and only himself to blame for frequent failure. In his account, he tells Pauline how, until he has unlocked 'the sleepless brood/ Of fancies from [his] soul' (Pauline, 6-7), 'it were vain/ To hope to sing' (Pauline, 16-17). In looking back he can see how he has misdirected himself.

His claim that he

had been spared this shame if [he] had sat
By [Pauline] for ever from the first, in place
Of [his] wild dreams of beauty and of good

(Pauline, 28-30)

indicates his misguidedness when, at the end of the poem, Pauline still seems to be no more than an idea in his mind. She is not endowed with special personal qualities in the poem (unless passivity is one). It is difficult for us to see why her presence would have made him behave differently or better, except that to his mind she appears as a redemptive figure. There is no suggestion that she has even the few, but solid, positive personal qualities of Agnes, who performs a similar function for David Copperfield. Her lover feels, however, that Pauline would have been a stabilising force, almost like a mother to a young child. There would have been

No vague wish unexplained, no wandering aim
Sent back to bind on fancy's wings and seek
Some strange fair world where it might be a law;
But, doubting nothing, had been led by thee,
Thro' youth, and saved

(Pauline, 33-7)

These lines hint that, had she been there all the time, her lover might never have gained the ambition to sing at all! However they also tell us something of his problems; wandering aims have bound on the wings of fancy and searched for 'some strange fair world' in which they could be true. The implication is that his restlessness has brought him nothing true to speak in this world, but his only hopes have been in fantasy.

Pauline is, however, blatantly not a stabilising force for him since, at the end of his long confession to her, his ambition is even higher than previously (and, in the light of earlier failure, more unrealistic) - to be 'priest and prophet as of old' (Pauline, 1019). Since his perceptions

about the woman he believes closest to him, and about her influence on him, appear so false, one is not encouraged to credit his other perceptions either. Indeed, one starts to read the poem on the look out for exaggerated claims. Arguably, this makes the poem all the more convincing as an account of adolescent thought, with the speaker still not fully grown up. What makes this the more likely is that the poem is a realistic account of the protagonist's attempt to order his consciousness.

In the examination of the aims and the failure of these aims in Pauline's lover, one should keep in mind the consideration that, whether or not the protagonist's account convinces, the aims of an adolescent are nowadays expected to be erratic (and Browning's own early history of false starts will have given him experience of this). This, together with the vagueness in relation to specific details, is typical of early youth. The protagonist's constant changes of direction, following each failure, produce a sense of incoherence when reading the poem which can be seen as strengthening the psychological realism. It might be helpful to see Pauline as an early account of adolescence from the inside.

Behind all the different directions, however, has been one central motive - to be what the protagonist is not. Like Paracelsus, Pauline's lover's aim is undefined and undefinable. He wants to change his character, and with it, his fate, but does not know how to set about it. It is unclear how fully - or often - the protagonist has seen this as his aim. At the start of his confession to Pauline, however, his language indicates more than a hint of this aim:

Sad confession first,...

Ere I can be - as I shall be no more.

(Pauline, 25-7)

Here, he appears to be hoping for some kind of absolution before death, the ultimate state of being for him. Before he dies he must confess, since then he will be no longer

in the world. The language here indicates also his earlier life's obsession with his own states of being. How he has felt has always been much more important for him than how he has acted. This partially explains the poem's difficulty - events are of the mind rather than observable by others. This can be seen as a weakness, since in later psychologically perceptive poems by Browning, physical setting and action is used to advantage to enhance our understanding of the characters' minds.

Pauline's lover's process through his life has been almost exclusively concerned with essences, and thus we see him describing a series of different directions taken by him without his giving us specific causes to explain these changes. As motivation for them, we can see only that previous directions have failed.

The narrator has been with Pauline in a time prior to the present of the poem, and her calmness was scarcely endurable. Before her words: 'Bade [him] look up and be what [he] had been', he had felt 'despair could never live by [her]' (Pauline, 74-5). She has exhorted him by her presence to be in some way less corrupt. However, immediately after describing this, the narrator tells how she is not dearer than song once was to him. Song was dear; he 'ne'er sung/But as one entering bright halls...' (Pauline, 77-8), but this comparison dehumanizes Pauline further.

His songs have been celebratory, triumphant. When he sang it was as if all would rise and shout for him. He has subsequently chosen gifts 'Distinct from theirs' (Pauline, 81) however; presumably 'theirs' refers to those in 'bright halls'. He has thus fallen and can only wish himself back to a state in which he was 'low and weak yet full of hope' (Pauline, 84). He now has 'gay mastery of mind' (Pauline, 86) - so he thinks - but would give it up to be with those in the bright halls, with the aim of changing something fundamental in himself, or, as he puts it: 'And with an aim - not being what I am' (Pauline, 88).

The narrator proceeds to describe the dreams which indicate the self he does not want to be. In these dreams he ruins beautiful things by their association with himself. He initially takes delight in the swan for instance and

tired not of [his] first free joy
In gazing on the peace of its pure wings
(Pauline,103-4)

However, after being with him in darkness, he realises its eyes must be dim and its

silver pinions must be cramped and numbed
With sleeping ages here
(Pauline,108-9)

and it can no longer leave him since it would now appear withered next to its own kind. In such dreams, he 'seemed the fate from which [he] fled' (Pauline,97). In a way he finds strange and cannot explain, the narrator has taken pleasure in being self-destructive; like an awkward adolescent:

I felt
A strange delight in causing my decay
(Pauline,98-9)

That the narrator has been the cause of his own failure is the central message in his descriptions of the dreams. This makes the dreams important in the poem; whatever is lovely in himself or in association with him has been dragged down and tainted and changed for the worse by him. The fact that he can realise that this is how it appears to others does not stop him from spoiling beautiful creatures. He has been the cause of his own failure. Arguably, he is also the cause of Pauline's failure to respond; she has been pulled down by association with him until she can offer him nothing but an excuse to tell all.

The dream sections indicate the vagueness of the perceptions the narrator has of his past life; the dreams are like

metaphors for what is happening to him internally, but we have to take his word for it - he does not tell us precisely which aspects of himself have been ruined. Elsewhere, however, he analyses a particular fault more specifically, when he states that his 'intensest life', his clear sense 'of consciousness/Of self' (Pauline,268-70) is linked to self-supremacy in him, and is powerful:

to create and rule and call
Upon all things to minister to it
(Pauline,275-6)

to that inner self. It is in his imagination that he has, like Sordello, been able to summon up all kinds of images to serve him and give him pleasure. His imagination has been

a very angel, coming not
In fitful visions but beside [him] ever
And never failing [him]
(Pauline,285-7)

While his imagination has often proved harmless and even beneficial to him, along with his ability to call 'The dark past up to quell it regally' (Pauline,290), goes what he calls 'a principle of restlessness' (Pauline,277), which is not dissimilar from Tamburlaine's over-reaching. This principle

would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all
(Pauline,278)

He realises now that pursuit of these all-embracing ambitions would have been futile; he would have been

Though gifted lower than the meanest soul
(Pauline,280)

The thematic echo of Lucifer's fall as the result of ambition adds to the force of the narrator's perception

for us. This perception adds a further moral significance to his dreams, where what is lovely has been dragged down by him. In connection with him, the swan's pinions become cramped and the god becomes less radiant. They are still beautiful to him despite the fact that they can never again exist in their own right in the element in which they appear beautiful among their own kind. Everything loved by the narrator is doomed - whether in actuality or in his thoughts. Shelley even seems less significant when the narrator discovers he has not been the only one to perceive the 'sun-treader' as a 'star' and so he can no longer imagine the relationship between him and Shelley to be somehow reciprocated. This is a different kind of loss, and even as he tells Pauline of it he is musing on another possible loss:

And I, perchance, half feel a strange regret
That I am not what I have been to thee

(Pauline, 191-2)

He does not term this disillusionment but it is the despondency of a young person who first discovers his personal hero is hero to many others. This diminishes his own self-esteem.

Despite his various ambitions, his love for Shelley and for Pauline, the narrator now feels able to claim that his one 'lode-star' (Pauline, 292) has always been

A need, a trust, a yearning after God

(Pauline, 295)

He sees now, how in relation to that star he has 'halted/
Or hastened' (Pauline, 293-4).¹ He claims that he has only recently 'analysed' (Pauline, 296) this feeling, but is nonetheless convinced that it always underlay his actions. He claims this despite the fact that it is hard for us to believe in the narrator's sense of a reconciliation between this need for God and 'a neglect of all I deemed his laws' (Pauline, 298). He has neglected God's laws

even though he has despised this in others:

Which yet, when seen in others, I abhorred
(Pauline, 299)

It is the more difficult for us to believe his words since he does not give us specific examples of the ways in which he has neglected God's laws. Much of his history so far has been expressed in terms of imagination or of dream, so it is possible that his neglect of God is equally self-imagined.

His belief in God is based on a feeling, rather like Paracelsus' belief that he has been chosen for a quest. God has not shown Paracelsus the path, and Pauline's lover's evidence for his belief is that he

felt as one beloved, and so shut in
From fear

(Pauline, 300-301)

This is despite the fact that at 'a sad after-time' he 'could doubt/Even [God's] being' (Pauline, 304-5). Despite his conviction, at the time of the telling, that God has always guided him, this has not prevented many doubts and mistakes along the way. In his narration, these are seen more prominently than any benefits he might expect to derive from God's protection. For instance, in his exploration of 'the dim orb/Of self' (Pauline, 91-2) his soul has conformed itself to that orb rather than remaining as 'strong and free as ever' (Pauline, 92).

This dragging down of things, whether external to himself or inwardly, has probably been the narrator's main fault throughout his life. This failure has been reflected in his dreams, has spoilt his love for Shelley and has caused, perhaps, the lack of response from Pauline. The more he has incorporated her into his life the less capable she has proved of showing her own character (as proved in the very structure of the poem) let alone exhorting him to

higher things. Despite the life-long stifling of his soul, he hopes that by laying it bare 'in its fall' (Pauline,124) he may be able to be young again. This he believes to be possible due to God's power. Judging, however, by the wilfulness of his past life, and by the egotistic telling of it to Pauline, it is hard for us to believe in this as more than another fantasy. Our disbelief is emphasized at this point when, subsequent to the narrator's telling of the 'glow' he felt at God's 'award' (Pauline,142), he proceeds to describe his failures in more detail.

His love for Shelley has been misguided; he can no longer 'walk calm' (Pauline,220) with him; it is through tears that he will continue to praise Shelley. His former idealism, or idolisation, adds to his later disappointment. He sees how

foul forms

Seek me, which ne'er could fasten on [Shelley's] mind
(Pauline,213-4)

Possibly his disillusionment is the more bitter because his hero-worship has been extreme and unrealistic, the association having done him no good. With Pauline as with Shelley, there is no room for anything to be lacking in the idol. His idealised view of them implies his inability to be influenced by them as real people.

His Shelley has failed him, and so has his search after personal fulfillment; his

eyes have grown dim

With looking for some star which breaks on him
Altered and worn and weak and full of tears.

(Pauline,227-9)

Despite all his watching and his hope in God, which has helped him fight self-dissipation (Pauline,291), in the end, in what sounds like utter weariness, he confesses:

I can love nothing

(Pauline,310)

The sense of weariness is suggested by his saying how this seems like a 'dull truth' (Pauline,310) to him. The loss of enthusiasm however, as after his other failures, is temporary, and having expressed it, he finds a new direction for hope:

sense supplies a love
Encircling me and mingling with my life.
(Pauline,311-12)

The force of the word 'sense' here is uncertain. With Jane Austen, 'sense' could be used to mean 'commonsense'. However, if it means something more akin to intuition or early Romantic 'sensibility', then it may, as counteractive to 'dull truth' provide more of a suggestion of optimism than would ~~mere~~ 'commonsense'. The interpretation of 'sense' as 'commonsense' would simply provide an equal counter to the words 'dull truth'. However, 'sensibility' implies an element of uncertainty, and with this meaning in mind, we should remain suspicious of his new optimism; it too may prove only temporary.

And so it does. After some time (and the narrator's vagueness about how much time^{elapsed} between or during a phase of his life emphasizes our awareness of his immaturity) the narrator states: 'I lost myself' (Pauline,345). This loss results from the changing of his soul as the result of being long 'chained down' (Pauline,344). We have heard that what has previously mingled with his life has been love. This however has not been a mere surface love:

strong beneath
Was a vague sense of power
(Pauline,340-341)

On the surface of his life has been a crude adherence to 'immediate wants' (Pauline,340). Presumably it is these which have chained him down. His soul 'changed' as a result of his restraint (Pauline,345). It appears as if what was restrained was the (better) power that underlay everyday

concerns. Now the loss of his earlier self is so loathsome to the narrator that he cannot bring himself to

recall how first I learned to turn
My mind against itself

(Pauline, 347-8)

The effects were found in deeds as dreadful, and unreal-seeming, as delirious dreams; his alienation is similar to that of the speaker in Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode'.

The narrator's lack of will to recall how he turned his mind against itself indicates what can be seen as a major problem when reading the poem. Various states of being are shown sequentially but rarely is there found connection between them in any but the vaguest terms. The narrator does not unknowingly reveal himself in the way we may admire when reading Dramatis Personae. It becomes easy to see where Mill's criticisms that the poem indicates immaturity come from. If we read the poem simply as an account of adolescent thought, we may disregard this objection on the grounds that the speaker - quite naturalistically - feels no need to connect the various phases of his erratic life of thought. That said, it remains that these two lines read like a poor excuse for not investigating his learning to turn his mind against itself.

That the deeds he condemns seemed like dreams made them
no less evil, for resulting from them

Came cunning, envy, falsehood, all world's wrong
That spotted me

(Pauline, 351-2)

This echo of Milton's 'fall' perhaps puts his inability to describe his process to self-hatred in a more convincing light. It is too terrible to think of; emotion stands in the way of his descriptive ability. Also, like Milton's Eve, his mind must have been confused while undergoing the temptation leading to the fall. Like Milton's Eve too,

the self-consciousness produced by the fall inhibits memory of the situation before it, since innocent things become swiftly submerged by more immediate guilty concerns.

For reason as little explained as the reason(s) behind his fall, he 'cleansed [his] soul' (Pauline, 352). Despite this, the influence of the world remained, the wrong of the world. He is led a certain way 'back to peace' (Pauline, 356) through 'the still life [he] led, apart once more' (Pauline, 354). With the return of inner peace, he looked for 'some pursuit' and 'song rose' (Pauline, 357-8) - spontaneously, as it were. It could be that Browning is influenced here by Wordsworth, in 'Tintern Abbey' for instance, where music arises from peace and quietness. When 'wild ecstasies' are 'matured' into 'sober pleasure' (TA, 138-9) then, he says:

thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies
(TA, 139-42)

He does add that this impulse towards song was not new, but a combination of earlier impulses, and the one which best combined them. Basically, he says these impulses have consisted of a deep-rooted yearning after God, even though we have seen this oddly demonstrated in what appear as selfish, immediate ambitions. His initial impulse to sing, however, was not consciously directed by any of his earlier impulses; he was not then aware of any impulse towards God:

I had
An impulse but no yearning - only sang.
(Pauline, 375-6)²

His new way of life, as a singer, starts no more successfully than any of his other ambitions. It sounds as if the music

comes spontaneously when we hear:

And first I sang as I in dream have seen
Music wait on a lyrist for some thought,
Yet singing to herself until it came.

(Pauline, 377-9)

However, the resulting songs give him the sense of having 'done nothing' (Pauline, 383); he had only made 'Rude verses' (Pauline, 382) on beautiful 'old times and scenes' (Pauline, 380). Having failed here, he finds out about other paths, and is not in the least awed by these:

I rather sought
To rival what I wondered at than form
Creations of my own

(Pauline, 390-92)

Even though he uses other singers' ideas, these are to start him off only:

if much was light
Lent by the others, much was yet my own.

(Pauline, 392-3)

Following this he, in effect, grows up - into more awareness of self also:

I was no more a boy, the past was breaking
Before the future and like fever worked.
I thought on my new self, and all my powers
Burst out.

(Pauline, 395-8)

He recognises the false basis for the pride he took then:

In wandering o'er thought's world to seek some one
To be my prize

(Pauline, 401-2)³

'Powers' may seem stronger than 'feelings' but it can easily be seen that these are more superficial qualities than his old deep idealistic longings. When the narrator examines this change in his motivation, or even his character, all he finds is that his powers are greater than they have been before. His soul now seems like a 'temple' (Pauline,469), only with 'some dark spirit' (Pauline,472) having usurped God's seat. And he was powerful enough to use fancy to prevent himself from brooding on the past. This will prevent his recognition of his change of character for the worse. However, even when fancy enables him to forget the past, it can not soothe his mind from his knowledge of his potential for self-destruction:

" I have nursed up energies,
" They will prey on me."

(Pauline,481-2)

The 'band' (Pauline,482) that knelt to the narrator is presumably composed of his own fancies, which he now sees as rightly subservient to his comfort. He resolves not to let old age creep up - he would make full use of his youth instead:

I would make mine, and die.

every hour

(Pauline,503-4)

Now, in the poem's time, he sees this was just another way to chain down his spirit and he now sees 'fancy' as false, a sad alternative to 'truth's peace' (Pauline,509). When fancy leaves, it leaves one all the more despondent. The sorrow is for the narrator here similar to how Keats expresses it at the end of 'Ode to a Nightingale':

the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.

(Ode to a Nightingale,73-4)

The narrator now considers how he immediately turned to the sort of songs that would give him fame. However, for the first time, the idea of a new ambition did not inevitably lead to his following it. He has at last recognised that he 'again should sink' (Pauline,544). And this recognition brings his reminiscence to the present as he starts to re-examine his experiences.

As a result of what he has gone through, he now sees that any idol is bound to perish. Humans may fade, but worthy idols should not. He feels that love can work only when one sees oneself as inferior to the beloved. It is better to help the beloved to flourish than to 'rise and rival him' (Pauline,557). That said, he cannot change his soul, which continues to 'advance' (Pauline,588). However he has abused his soul, having confined it himself - his soul still has impulses:

Referring to some state of life unknown.

(Pauline,600)

His soul persists in these impulses despite his (worldly) selfishness and inability to be satisfied:

My selfishness is satiated not,
It wears me like a flame

(Pauline,601-2)

What he describes as 'restlessness of passion' is combined with 'A craving after knowledge' (Pauline,620-21). Despite this, and his attempts to reduce such cravings, he feels now that 'soul still exceeds' (Pauline,636) any sense to be gained on earth. It seems impossible to him that 'earth's life' should prove his 'only sphere' (Pauline,634). Earthly love he feels is bound to the earth; even if his 'chainless' (Pauline,639) reason informs his love so that it passes 'all human love' (Pauline,644), it would still fall short of what he believes his love should be. Along with this knowledge, he is no longer able to forget himself in friendship, since he has started to understand hate - his first

hatred being himself.

Just as he has dissipated his own energies, his hatred is focused on himself. He himself provides:

the chasm
'Twixt what I am and all I fain would be
(Pauline,676-7)

His impulses for any kind of action he explains to his 'own loss' (Pauline,682). He is, it seems, now perceiving himself as out of control of his own mind. As with Sordello, his negative self-absorption takes him ever further from taking any action at all. The line: 'There's some vile juggle with my reason here' (Pauline,681) has a similar impact to Robert Lowell's: 'My mind's not right' in 'Skunk Hour', when, having seen the display of distortion in the protagonist's mind, we are persuaded to sympathise with him due to his own, intelligent, perception of his state of crisis.

The narrator's love for Pauline now seems more overtly in doubt than before. After the narrator's doubting of anything positive in life, he refers to 'life's dull joys' (Pauline,679); he exclaims:

Love! is not this to love thee, my Pauline?
(Pauline,689)

Whether this plea is addressed more to her or to himself, it sounds desperate and sounds now as if it is hollow:

I cherish prejudice, lest I be left
Utterly loveless?
(Pauline,690-91)

There is no attempt to say more of his 'love' for Pauline here, unless it forms part of his attempt to seek 'refuge' in himself (Pauline,687). Love is 'prejudice' to be treasured lest he is left entirely without it. Because of love's

mutability, he, for the moment, most cherishes his love for England (Pauline,696); his love for Pauline at this point appears to be no more than another fantasy. This sense of fantasy is emphasised by his next appeal: 'Pauline, could I but break the spell!' (Pauline,698). Whether this plea is addressed to her, or to himself, the phrase 'could I but' indicates that he expects the plea to be futile. Immediately following it, his 'Not now -/All's fever' shows his unreadiness to embark on calm or constant pursuit. His problem lies in what might well be termed dilettantism, though he sees his chameleon-type nature as (like Keats) something positive. The visions he tells now show something more positive, if still unproductive, in his nature. Along with his negative volatility has thrived a Romantic empathy with external things; through this he has learned something of beauty and joy:

I can live all the life of plants, and gaze
Drowsily on the bees that flit and play,
Or bare my breast for sunbeams which will kill
(Pauline,716-8)

These lines are reminiscent of Oberon's speech in A Midsummer Night's Dream: 'I know a bank...'. They have the lushness in Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' of:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet...
(Ode to a Nightingale,41-3)

But while the lines in Pauline are as languid as those of Keats, they do not display such a degree of passivity. The narrator is now speaking in the language of magic, of faery, celebrating his imagined ability to flit from element to element in nature to accommodate each mood displayed there.

The language of faery celebrates an emancipation from ordinary physical, human constraints; the narrator now

imagines his every mood can be accommodated by his ability to flit freely from one landscape to another and even from one element to another. The tentative echo of Oberon's speech is seen in the luxuriant quality of lines 716-8 quoted above; the rhythm is relaxed, and the words reinforce the sense of ample time. The rest of the passage is more reminiscent of Puck's or Ariel's free-flitting involvement with nature:

Or open in the night of sounds, to look
For the dim stars; I can mount with the bird
Leaping airily his pyramid of leaves
And twisted boughs of some tall mountain tree,
Or rise cheerfully springing to the heavens;
Or like a fish breathe deep the morning air
In the misty sun-warm water

(Pauline, 719-25)

Feeling thus inspired, he asks Pauline to follow him in his imagination, and the next passage prefigures some of Browning's later works. 'Meeting at Night' seems almost a condensed account of lines 732-80. In both poems, there is a sense of entering quietness in nature, accelerating to a clearly sexual image.

thro' a cleft-way, thro' the moss and stone,
It joins its parent-river with a shout.

(Pauline, 779-80)

feels like a more exuberant version of 'I gain the shore with pushing prow' (Meeting at Night) followed by the image of the hearts beating together. This whole passage in Pauline, like 'Meeting at Night', demonstrates Browning's successful use of speed and rhythm. It is powerfully evocative:

Night, and one single ridge of narrow path
Between the sullen river and the woods
Waving and muttering

(Pauline, 732-4)

The scene is potentially dangerous - there is only one path, which is narrow and passes between dangers. He is also agitated by the agitation of the woman beside him:

Thou art so close by me, the roughest swell
Of wind in the tree-tops hides not the panting
Of thy soft breasts.

(Pauline, 738-40)

This image of some panic, mingled with tenderness, is quickly removed before it becomes more frightening: 'No, we will pass to morning - ' (Pauline, 740). This seems at first a safer time; the words are now 'old' (Pauline, 741) which makes them more familiar and beauty and trust may be found:

How the sun brightens in the mist, and here,
Half in the air, like creatures of the place,
Trusting the element, living on high boughs
That swing in the wind - look at the silver spray
Flung from the foam-sheet of the cataract
Amid the broken rocks!

(Pauline, 742-7)

The scene is light and brings refreshment. But now we find the element described is most ideal for 'the wild hawks' (Pauline, 747).

The narrator sees some threat in the 'hot noon' of such an environment and wishes instead that they dive down, 'safe' (Pauline, 748-9). The place he chooses is safe; he describes it as 'our new retreat' (Pauline, 749) and it makes a cool, attractive place; the shrubs are:

Dark, tangled, old and green, still sloping down
To a small pool whose waters lie asleep
Amid the trailing boughs turned water-plants

(Pauline, 751-3)

However visually attractive the scene, all is not well in

it emotionally. The narrator has chosen to lead them into a world where what is beautiful may be secure but it is secure to keep them in, as well as to keep more volatile elements out:

And tall trees overarch to keep us in
(Pauline, 754)

They are trapped in a beautiful world, but a world in danger of being beautiful in a fixed way, where the delicate shafts of sunlight have been transformed by the over-arching trees into 'emerald shafts' (Pauline, 755). The place is mysterious; the image of the

two or three strange trees...got together
Wondering at all around, as strange beasts herd
Together far from their own land
(Pauline, 757-9)

indicates that they may still be lost in this new, beautiful, static place. This image also brings a somewhat sinister effect to the scene. However, after this sinister part, which may simply indicate an awkwardness or shyness and apprehension felt by the lovers, he gains confidence to lead Pauline right into 'the very heart of the woods' (Pauline, 766). Here there is peace, exuberance and tenderness:

Shut thy soft eyes - now look - still deeper in!
This is the very heart of the woods all round
Mountain-like heaped above us; yet even here
One pond of water gleams
(Pauline, 765-8)⁵

'One thin clear sheet' of water has penetrated the 'silent depth' of the wood, but does not harm it; 'it lies/Still, as but let by sufferance' (Pauline, 770-72) unwilling to rush beyond its limits. The trees that bend over it are described as 'wild men' watching a 'sleeping girl' (Pauline, 773) where their fascination from over-looking her sleep is combined with a sense that she is being protected.

After these sexual suggestions, the ending of this passage leads to the beauty and excitement of more intimate moments following tentative mutual protection. The river has lain still on first entering the woods; the trees bend softly over the river. But then further intertwining leads to the full amalgamation of the small river with its parent:

And through [the trees'] roots long creeping plants
out-stretch

Their twined hair, steeped and sparkling; farther on,
Tall rushes and thick flag-knots have combined
To narrow it; so, at length, a silver thread,
It winds, all noiselessly through the deep wood
Till thro' a cleft-way, thro' the moss and stone,
It joins its parent-river with a shout.

(Pauline, 774-80)

Following this, there is a pause in the lines (in the 1888 version) that stresses the sex-related movement of this section, as the pause is followed by a sense of new vigour and refreshment:

Up for the glowing day, leave the old woods!

(Pauline, 781)

And the narrator turns his attention to the sky. Amid this 'Blue sunny air' (Pauline, 785) is a most incongruous sight - an image of beauty which reminds the narrator of an image of decay:

a great cloud floats laden
With light, like a dead whale that white birds pick
(Pauline, 785-6)

The next line may indicate that such an image can be dismissed, what is distasteful is far away, even though we know it to be there in the world:

Floating away in the sun in some north sea.

(Pauline, 787)

He states specifically that it is floating 'away' and the phrase 'some north sea' indicates his lack of concern with it.

As a result of the physical celebration just described, in his new-found buoyancy, the narrator turns to God, to:

The clear, dear breath of God that loveth us
(Pauline, 789)

Though after this, we see one brief lapse again to discontent; the narrator has moved from self-destructive, emotional aims to a faery-like vision, to a real empathy with nature, to the final exultation of perceiving God as greatest. This movement can be seen in the section just described. But, in the poem as a whole, the narrator has provided us with accounts of so many failed paths, that it is difficult to believe that this new belief is not just yet another venture, doomed to failure. What redeems it is the new celebratory note, the tone of sensuous musical poetry more sonorous than elsewhere in the monologue. These lines have the clash of words for a cymbal-like effect that Gerard Manley Hopkins was to employ, as well as a free-spoken expression of images of freedom:

Air, air, fresh life-blood, thin and searching air,
The clear, dear breath of God that loveth us,
Where small birds reel and winds take their delight!
(Pauline, 788-90)

The narrator distinguishes between the 'fresh life-blood' of God's clear air and the water-element where he wants Pauline to float with him in actuality.

Following such exuberant experience, the narrator moves from trees that shut him and his beloved in, to trees that surround the domestic scene:

The little smoking cots, mid fields and banks
And copses bright in the sun.

(Pauline, 804-5)

And now the 'hedgerows' (Pauline,806) concentrate his thought by keeping it in; he realises he cannot be immortally held by such domestic frontiers:

Hedgerows for me - those living hedgerows where
The bushes close and clasp above and keep
Thought in - I am concentrated - I feel;
But my soul saddens when it looks beyond:
I cannot be immortal, taste all joy.

(Pauline,806-10)

The narrator's despair at domesticity seems also a direct borrowing from 'Tintern Abbey' in the description of the hedgerows:

These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild

(TA,15-16)

However, for Wordsworth they are part of the remembered scene which gives him:

sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood and felt along the heart

(TA,27-8)

For Pauline's narrator they are an image of enclosure. And here is perhaps his most stricken cry of all; recognising his limits, he still sees his restless and directionless ambition:

O God, where do they tend - these struggling aims?
(Pauline,811)

From the moment of these revelations, the narrator is only bewildered by his past:

Why have I girt myself with this hell-dress?
Why have I laboured to put out my life?
Is it not in my nature to adore

(Pauline,831-3)

This by no means adds to our sense that he has to any degree understood his earlier life - as, indeed, he has only recounted it in the vaguest of terms, never explained it. This section, however, perhaps does add to the success of the poem's ending; this earlier life is irrelevant in comparison with the love of God.

His yearning for God having been established, however, what the narrator plans to do remains as uncertain as before and perhaps therefore even more unconvincing. His telling Pauline what they will do together is reminiscent of how Lear hopes to be with Cordelia at his end and perhaps therefore, knowing Lear's end, even more unconvincing:

We will go hand in hand,
I with thee, even as a child - love's slave,
Looking no farther than his liege commands.

(Pauline, 947-9)

I'll sit with thee while thou dost sing
Thy native songs, gay as a desert bird
Which crieth as it flies for perfect joy,
Or telling me old stories of dead knights;
Or I will read great lays to thee

(Pauline, 959-63)

The echo from Shelley's 'Skylark' is also pronounced, but here, the Lear echo seems more illuminating; the narrator's latent state is just another unrealistic idea - he himself realises it is a fantasy:

and though it fade,
And though ere the cold morning all be gone

(Pauline, 986-7)

His previous aims have failed; he is too late with this last hope - he stresses that the 'perfect joy' (Pauline, 994-1007) is at the end. His statement: 'I shall be priest and prophet as of old' (Pauline, 1019) is no more than pitiable in worldly terms; we see him with no more than some overdue insight

into his own behaviour. However, the narrator wants us to view this in other-worldly terms. He says he is dying and is content to die. Death may be as unknown as:

one going in the dark
To fight a giant
(Pauline, 1026-7)

but he wishes Pauline to know that his:

last state is happy, free from doubt
Or touch of fear.
(Pauline, 1030-31)

In the light of the bulk of the poem, this is difficult to swallow. We are used to seeing the narrator's inability to define precisely any state of mind, or to find a satisfactory one. So, at the end, we have suddenly to say that he has grown up to awareness of what is really important if we are to justify his new serenity. Or that he is simply under another delusion. Against this latter judgement is the lyricism of his words once he has begun to see the importance of 'God and truth/And love' (Pauline, 1020-21) and beauty of nature. As we do not discover what happens next, we are given no basis for deciding whether or not this new direction is his solution from now on.

This is in keeping with the rest of the poem, the narrator's constant changes of direction and false starts. We see the narrator progressing only to fall back again and again. This may well be said to make the poem psychologically plausible.

Notes

1. This is an example of where change from the 1833 to 1888 version of Pauline has clarified the meaning; the original uses the words: 'wasted,/Or progressed' instead of 'halted/Or hastened'. 'Wasted' is arguably more evocative because more extreme, but makes less sense.
2. This is a point where the contrast between the 1833 and 1888 version is revealing. The original reads: 'I had/
No wish to paint, no yearning - but I sang', the implication in the original being even more that song arose naturally at a point when he was uninterested in other artistic activities, and had no yearning he could identify.
3. The word 'prize' in the 1888 version has been changed from 'own' in the 1833 version - a notable difference.
4. Here, the 1888 edition uses 'Light-heartedness' where the original uses 'happiness'; this indicates that the quality of happiness is more superficial than Browning's original text implies.
5. It is difficult to choose between the punctuation of the 1833 and 1888 versions. The former, packed with hyphens, indicates breathlessness. The latter, smoothly flowing, seems more to indicate serenity.

PARACELSUS

In the chapter on Paracelsus I intend to concentrate on the quest theme in the poem. The first section will aim to show how, in Paracelsus' desire to know everything, he is largely rejecting an enormous aspect of total knowledge - love and friendship. He however sees as a sign of his maturation his wish to travel unsafely through the world, and alone. Festus in particular sees this desire as a 'plague-spot', potentially giving rise to something dangerous for himself, even for his personal safety as well as for the ultimate success of his aim to know all, directed he says by 'vast longings' (Para.,1,197) sent by God. Even in the first descriptions of his quest to Festus and Michal, Paracelsus reveals its shortcomings. He rejects not only their love but also what he sees as a less effective route to knowledge, the 'conventional' world's path, through the great learning institutes.

Following this I will continue to discuss his rejection of these aids in the light of his arrogance. He is able to throw himself into a new, previously unimagined way of life because he is supremely self-confident. And the very friends he now rejects have helped him to build up the confidence he now employs to leave them. Also, as enormous motivation for his resolve, he feels himself to be selected, one of God's elect. However he has no idea what form action arising from this feeling should take. A sense of being picked out by God substitutes for any knowledge of how best to set out on his new path. Festus points out that God would appoint the way to praise as well as the desire to praise. Paracelsus however shows no signs of knowing exactly what he will do. His path can therefore start only by rejection of known paths.

His arrogance is thus bound up largely with lack of contact or communication with or acceptance of others. It is not until he is dying that he himself really comes to a better awareness of this. Even the style of the work - speeches in long formal monologues - emphasises the

lack of real contact between the characters. When he meets Festus, after a time apart, Paracelsus reveals his lack of trust for his friend: 'I feared you', he says (Para., 111, 209). Just as he imagines how he and Aprile could become closer, Aprile dies. It is as though Paracelsus, while ostensibly questing to know the unfamiliar, away from known friends and closeness with others, always discovers too late how to gain real knowledge through intimacy with (nearly always) familiar figures. In the end it is clear he is most at ease with Festus; his basis for knowledge could have been in what he already knew. Instead he sets out into what for him begins - and mostly continues - as a void. Laurence Poston defines as Paracelsus' first error the fact that he ignores the future and rejects the past so that he can assert his will.¹ And it is this misplaced confidence that lets him do so. Morse Peckham however points out how Aprile is in the end more tormented than Paracelsus - going mad through the impossibility of gaining the infinite beauty and love of which he dreams; because of this he has neglected the beauty and love he could find in the world.² Paracelsus' quest, while taking him far from home and loved ones, has a different emphasis and so is, in that sense only, less frustrating.

In the end, as Earl Hilton says in his discussion of Sordello, the limitations of the world must be accepted, and the protagonist can grow only from this acceptance.³ Paracelsus' isolation comes from his wish for what we may term 'Romantic' knowledge or insight within a spontaneous social situation; his wish was conscious. A comparison can here be made with Sordello. The young Sordello, all unaware, grew 'naturally' apparently in tune with nature whereas on his return to Mantua he failed to achieve 'spontaneous' sympathy with nature because he had become self-conscious, and too aware of what he intended. In Pippa Passes Browning shows the reverse of this, showing what happens when completely unthinking action in the form of her songs acts powerfully on those who overhear her spontaneous singing and start to reform their lives as a result.

Northrop Frye speaks of the residual anarchism at the heart of Romanticism - the feeling that society can develop only by individualising the self, by being tolerant or flexible enough to allow the individual to find his or her own identity within it, even though, doing so, he or she comes to repudiate most of that society's traditional values.⁴ Paracelsus has to learn that society as he knows it need not stifle his own aims and that his path to success can in the end be achieved only through communication with others. In Sordello again, Browning stresses the importance of accepting that one individual can do only so much in terms of the world's progress. Paracelsus has been handicapped by seeing himself as guided by a truth that is entirely internal, in isolation from society. He eventually must come to realise that the future relies on collective human progress.

The next section is to deal with the poem's progression, in terms of Paracelsus' emotional and intellectual development. In doing so, it will discuss his encounters with others - Festus and Michal (and his reunions with Festus) and Aprile, thinking about the effect his meeting with the latter has on his relationship with the former and, as Poston noticed, about Aprile's lust for 'eternal, infinite love' in contrast with Festus' human, compassionate frailty.

Paracelsus is seeking to know and he would know everything. From the very opening of the poem we can, with Festus, see the limitations to his quest. As we realise how differently he regards friendship and love from the way his friends see it, we can see his rejection of a huge area of life that should be intrinsic to such an aim. He sees as a development his wish to travel unsafely leaving out friendship, love and the joy that springs from these; he is unaware that he is certain to fail through his rejection of them. His quest is without real direction; he feels chosen by God, therefore he will set out, but he has no knowledge of a path to start on. He misconceives the whole basis for a search for knowledge, considering as necessary geographical distancing from both loved

ones and a more conventional worldly route to excellence. He is starting on his chosen path as an escape from how he has lived up till now, rather than as a positive step into something new.

In describing his quest to Festus and Michal, Paracelsus already reveals its limitations. In bidding them farewell, perhaps, for all he knows, for ever, he is in no way swayed by Michal's tears or Festus' arguments. He says his heart will be made 'Quiet and fragrant' (Para., 1, 6) when he remembers them, and wishes them just to remember the best moments with him:

For if you would remember me aright,
As I was born to be, you must forget
All fitful strange and moody waywardness
Which e'er confused my better spirit, to dwell
Only on moments such as these, dear friends.

(Para., 1, 10-14)

They are, it is implied, very close this moment before parting, but nonetheless by asking them to remember this time he is asking that they remember saddest, rather than simply sweetest, moments. He believes that he will be content with the thought of his friends rather than their actual presence. In being able to trust to his belief in their safety he takes no account of the kind of concern they may feel on his behalf. He feels 'simple joy' at the thought they will be 'shut in' from the dangers he anticipates experiencing (Para., 1, 70); his

weary spirit-disposed
To lose awhile its care in soothing thoughts
Of them

(Para., 1, 73-5)

will not need to wish anything to make them more content than they are

But, unobstructed, may at once forget
Itself in them, assured how well they fare.
(Para., 1, 82-3)

That they might wish to feel similar reassurance or that he is wrong about their safety does not occur to him - and perhaps he cannot fully understand Michal's weeping on their last evening. His 'drop by drop she is weeping like a child' (Para., 1, 23) indicates his underplaying of her adult fears about what he describes as 'the rude chances like to be my lot' (Para., 1, 72). He can conceive of remembering their company with pleasure - a sort of fond safety-net for his solitary thoughts in the future - but will not compromise to make his friends feel happier about him. In neglecting his part in the friendship, he is largely forsaking his only friends and thus a huge area of emotional depth which should comprise part of his search.

However he sees this neglect as a development and his tone in rejecting Festus' love is not dissimilar from that of the growing child churlishly rejecting his or her parents' advice:

You bid me listen for your true loves' sake:
Yet how has grown that love? Even in a long
And patient cherishing of the self-same spirit
It now would quell; as though a mother hoped
To stay the lusty manhood of the child
Once weak upon her knees.

(Para., 1, 143-8)

His message is the same as that of a young person on the verge of branching out alone: 'You brought me up to be like this - so why are you stopping me now?'. He is not as rejecting of Festus however as the so-called 'typical adolescent'. He recognises stages in his own development; from one who 'shrank/From ought that marked me out apart from men' into one 'informed and fearless' (Para., 1, 152-3) He does in this acknowledge the help of Festus, who 'first guided me through doubt and fear/Taught me to know mankind and know myself' so that he could 'reject all aims/Save those your earnest words made plain to me' (Para., 1, 154-8). But, like the newly-grown child, he ignores, or scarcely hears the earnest words Festus now attempts, feeling he has outgrown such warnings. He has no idea

why Festus and Michal do not give him 'a triumph in their eyes' which he 'would have' (Para., 1, 160). He cannot, however, impose his will on these concerned friends, and he has insufficient insight to understand their anxiety, interrupting Festus, rather than deigning to hear his words. And, it seems, this has often been the case - Paracelsus, carried away by the sound of his own voice simply does not attend to that of Festus. The way Festus describes this indicates the theatricality of Paracelsus' words. Festus says:

My words have their old fate and make faint stand
Against your glowing periods.

(Para., 1, 381-2)

Paracelsus' rhetorical ability has carried him away from the world of reality to a world of glowing phrases - which, it is implied, are representatives of the unreal. Festus' speech that follows indicates the potential absurdity of Paracelsus' aims; 'Why not converse with the dead? Why not go and read what the sea writes in caves?' (Para., 1, 299) God has not appointed the 'way of praise' and Paracelsus is in danger of being harmed. His being unwilling to reciprocate equally in the friendships we see runs parallel to his unwillingness to depend on others. When he declares, 'I never will be served by those I serve' (Para., 1, 613), Festus at once sees his potential danger, asking, 'How can that course be safe which from the first/Produces carelessness to human love?' (Para., 1, 619-20) 'Disguise it how [Paracelsus] may' (Para., 1, 615). Festus perceives a plague-spot - only a spot at present 'but it will break/Into a hideous blotch if overlooked!' (Para., 1, 616-7). Paracelsus tells Festus he is giving up the helps 'which men/Who overpass their kind...Have humbly sought' (para., 1, 622-3). But Festus' qualms are bound to be of no avail in Paracelsus' mind, since, as Festus can see, Paracelsus has found no real alternative path. If he stops to listen to Festus too long his feeling that he is one singled out could be dissipated. He is obsessed with the idea of the search for knowledge rather as Shelley's Alastor is obsessed with the idea of love:

I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love.
I sought something to love since I was in love with
loving. ⁵

Paracelsus, like Alastor, starts off with the least substantial idea of what will satisfy what seems to be a single-minded craving. But he does not know where he is going - so his only starting point is of rejection. And so he can only reject what is dear and familiar to him. In his earlier path to knowledge he has had ostensibly the same aim as now - to learn as much as widely as possible. Festus describes him:

not one youth
Of those so favoured, whom you now despise,
Came earnest as you came, resolved, like you,
To grasp all, and retain all, and deserve
By patient toil a wide renown like his

(Para., 1, 242-6)

Paracelsus rejects the method of 'patient toil' (Para., 1, 282) in his new aspiration - 'to know' but the difference now is that he no longer has a real path to follow. He believes that he is giving a ready answer to the will of God 'Who summons me to be his organ' (Para., 1, 294). Festus acknowledges this as an aim but stresses how dubious he is about it: 'this, the end, is not the instrument' (Para., 1, 305). The end is, to his mind, to praise God through the attaining of the 'general welfare' of humankind. He tells Paracelsus, 't is doubtless need/ That [God] appoint no less the way of praise/ Than the desire to praise.' (Para., 1, 298-300). Paracelsus, then, appears at the outset as an idealist with no practical plan by which to realise his ideals. So the only practical start he can imagine is the rejection of his current situation, in terms both of friendship and profession, both of which should be contained in his long term intentions if they are to succeed.

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Paracelsus' urge to set out on his quest has been seen to be based in a 'restlessness' principle, common to Romantic poets. This is tension-raising rather than reducing.

E.D.H. Johnson suggests that Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello have one theme in common, 'the evolution of the creative impulse in artists beset by uncertainty'.⁶ So Paracelsus' rejection of his present situation could be seen as bound up with uncertainty and restlessness. His singlemindedness arises from a rejection of living 'carelessly and well'. His human relationships at Wurzburg, have limitations as we have seen, and he will be deterred by no practical or emotional consideration.

His urge to follow his one aim is also based on ignorance; he does not realise that his intention to know should include knowledge of his present situation and human companionship until after he has met Aprile. Thence he begins to perceive his own limitations in the light of understanding Aprile and his limitations. Earlier than this however, he has started to miss the company of which he had thought he would be content with the memory:

And Festus - my poor Festus, with his praise
And council and grave fears - where is he now
With the sweet maiden, long ago his bride?

(Para.,11,129-31)

Even at this point Paracelsus believes unthinkingly in his ability to control his own life:

I have made life consist of one idea

(Para.,11,140)

with the emphasis on himself as orderer - and to my mind, limiter also, cutting his life down to one idea. He remembers a pleasurable time previous to this:

I bear a memory of a pleasant life
Whose small events I treasure.

(Para.,11,142-3)

The word 'small' is significant here, and the seven grassy fields he ran over to Festus were 'little'. Littleness may well indicate affection but it is a term of affection for what he believes he has grown up away

from. He has decided to leave what he now regards as 'little' 'to become/ The greatest and more glorious man on earth' (Para., 11, 149-50) regardless of the fact that he has set limits on his life in trying to make it consist of one idea. It is also more paltry now in that his memory of what he told Festus (ie that he wished to become greatest and most glorious) couples ill with his profession originally (Bk 1) that actually his aim to 'know all' was due to a wish to praise God. And, in fact, in the end he discovers that part of the 'littleness' he leaves is the very love and stability he learns to miss.

Paracelsus' arrogance is significant in this decision - making. His supreme self-confidence has been built up with the help of the friends and the institute he now rejects. He has not previously however been exposed to any kind of personal ordeal, and now he feels himself to be selected by God, he cannot imagine the difficulties he could face or how he could fail to succeed. However, as said earlier, he has no idea what form any action should take. Festus points out that God would need to appoint the way of praise no less than the wish to praise, but Paracelsus over-rides this advice. As Festus says, his

words have their old fate, and make faint stand
Against [Paracelsus'] glowing periods.

(Para., 1, 381-2)

Through his own verbiage, Paracelsus has convinced himself. In Markham's Tamburlaine, we might have termed it bombast.

His arrogance is overwhelming:

I can devote myself; I have a life
To give; I, singled out for this, the One!
Think, think! the wide East, where all wisdom sprung;
The bright South, where she dwelt; the hopeful North,
All are passed o'er - it lights on me!

(Para., 1, 367-71)

More than this, being chosen from the whole world, Paracelsus,

with enormous optimism or foolhardiness, assumes that his actions to come are going to have an enormous impact on the world - he is not only picked out for a special truth, but his task is going to be akin to that of Messiah:

'T is time
New hopes should animate the world , new light
Should dawn from new revealings to a race
Weighed down so long, forgotten so long; thus shall
The heavens renewed for us at last receive
Creatures whom no unwonted splendours blind,
But ardent to confront the unclouded blaze
Whose beams not seldom blessed their pilgrimage,
Not seldom glorified their life below?

(Para., 1,372 -80)

Small wonder Festus cannot counteract Paracelsus' 'glowing periods' ! This does not lessen his conviction that Paracelsus is setting out in the wrong direction. He agrees that

A fresh eye, a fresh hand
Might do much at their vigour's waning-point;
Succeeding with new-breathed, new-hearted force,
As at old games, the runner snatched the torch
From runner still

(Para., 1,392-6)

But he sees how Paracelsus is setting out in a direction which cannot bring what he hopes to the rest of mankind:

But you have coupled with your enterprise,
An arbitrary self-repugnant scheme
Of seeking it in strange and untried paths.
What books are in the desert? Writes the sea
The secret of her yearning in vast caves
Where yours will fall the first of human feet?
Has wisdom sat there and recorded aught
You press to read?

(Para., 1,397-405)

Why, asks Festus, is Paracelsus turning aside from wisdom,
to head for

solitude consigned to barrenness
By God's decree?
(Para.,1,406-7)

Paracelsus' reply does nothing to answer this question. He could have replied by pointing out that solitude and quiet is suitable for philosophical thought. Instead he simply reiterates his belief in what amounts to following his instinct:

from childhood I have been possessed
By a fire - by a true fire, or faint or fierce,
As from without some master, so it seemed,
Repressed or urged its current
(Para.,1,425-8)

His belief is however founded on a wish to believe that some external force is in control:

rather
I will believe an angel ruled me thus,
Than that my soul's own workings, own high nature,
So became manifest.
(Para.,1,429-32)

The 'I will believe' implies his imposition of his own will on his belief - it has not been a matter of spontaneous faith, as it would be in the creative impulse as described in The Prelude's 'spots of time'. For example, after Wordsworth's moonlit vision of 'the roar of waters, torments, streams/Innumerable, roaring with one voice' (The Prelude,X111,59) a meditation 'rose' in him, giving him the sense that Nature had exhibited 'The perfect image of a mighty mind' (The Prelude,X111,70). Paracelsus' wish to believe in having been selected by an external force triggers his decision to believe it. This belief also relieves him of responsibility for his actions; if a mistake is made, it will be as a result of an 'external'

lack of control, by no means to be blamed on himself alone. In Wordsworth such a vision is a gift to aid the visionary in his morality.

It is his feeling that he is bound to soar above the rest of mankind that is the basis for his pride:

from the tumult in my breast, this only
Could I collect, that I must thenceforth die
Or elevate myself far, far above
The glorious spectacle

(Para., 1, 458-61)

His restlessness has provided the basis for his belief that he is bound to become superior to others. The form this superiority will take is again almost like that of Messiah, without the humility,

I seemed to long
At once to trample on, yet save mankind,
To make some unexampled sacrifice
In their behalf, to wring some wondrous good
From heaven or earth for them, to perish, winning
Eternal weal in the act

(Para., 1, 462-7)

His motivation, as can be seen, for providing endless good is revealed as contaminated: 'I seemed to long/At once to trample on, yet save mankind' (Para., 1, 462-3). It would not be enough for him merely to save, without asserting his superiority to them. However, once he had achieved this feat, he would want to 'withdraw from their officious praise' (Para., 1, 471) (the word 'officious' further stresses his scorn for the mass of people - like 'profuse' in the following line) and put it down to chance - in underplaying it in fact asserting his superiority still more markedly!

Festus rightly teases (or mocks) these feelings:

Good: let us hear
No more about your nature, "which first shrank
"From all that marked you out apart from men!"

(Para.,1,483-5)

Paracelsus then refers to what he has described as a
'mad impulse' (Para.,1,487). He describes how he was
tempted to

Know, not for Knowing's sake,
"But to become a star to Men for ever;
"Know! for the gain it gets, the praise it brings,
"The wonder it inspires, the love it breeds...

(Para.,1,526-9)

However, he has rejected this; the still voice he perceives
as 'from without' (Para.,1,512) asks him

"Wilt thou adventure for my sake and man's,
"Apart from all reward?"

(Para.,1,542-3)

And so Paracelsus' ultimate decision is taken: 'I go to
prove my soul' (Para.,1,559). He is certain that his path
will come by instinct:

I see my way as birds their trackless way....
I shall arrive!...
[God] guides me and the bird.

(Para.,1,560-62)

And so at last Michal is convinced - 'Vex him no more,
Festus, it is so!' (Para.,1,566). But Festus is not
convinced; he points out the way in which Paracelsus'
conviction is based on a false analogy - it 'would hold/
Were it the trackless air' (Para.,1,567-8) but to his mind
Paracelsus is gratuitously rejecting the path of tradition,
from which he could learn - 'at least accept the light
they lend.' (Para.,1,572) Paracelsus utterly rejects
this advice; the fruits of knowledge have resulted in
the past in a dark and groaning earth; he sees the wise

men of the past as producing 'dry wells' (Para.,1,580) merely. Shall he sit beside those

While in the distance heaven is blue above
Mountains where sleep the unsunned tarns?

(Para.,1,582-3)

Presumably by this he means tarns previously unrevealed, but we must wonder if he is the person to awake them, particularly as Festus sees all this as delusion.

His arrogance is also potentially dangerous. Festus points this out in his speech concerned with Paracelsus' rejection of human love:

Were I elect like you,
I would encircle me with love, and raise
A rampart of my fellows; it should seem
Impossible for me to fail, so watched
By gentle friends who made my cause their own.
They would ward off fate's envy -

(Para.,1,633-8)

In support of this Michal points out her inability to sing without calling Paracelsus and Festus to listen, but all this Paracelsus sees as insulting; he feels that his friends are suggesting that his aims are not great enough in their own right to motivate him without human support.

So, he begins from a position of security in which he is restless and feels restrained. Not content to follow the wisdom of the past in order to learn, he is determined to set out alone, ignoring the advice of his friends, seeing his quest as so important that he will pursue it alone without support, the possibility that human love could prove part of what he seeks not entering his thoughts.

He considers that he is simply laying his own affections 'to rest awhile' (Para.,1,814). His aim should work because he believes in truth as abiding in 'an inmost centre' (Para.,1,727):

... to KNOW

Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendours may escape,
Than in effecting entry, for a light
Supposed to be without

(Para.,1,733-7)

His aim is to set free his own soul which he believes to be that of a priest. He believes he will have to sacrifice his youth to this end - but to him this is nothing; in fact he believes his affections will awake purified by all he has achieved (Para.,1,814). He sees himself as a diver preparing to plunge, in the belief he will rise with a pearl. (Para.,1,830)

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Nine years later, Paracelsus is pausing to consider what he has gained 'without regard/To the extent above' (Para.,11,14-15). He still believes in a 'brilliant' future (Para.11,17) but has actually learnt little positive. He cannot remember when he did not know that 'Time fleets, youth fades, life is an empty dream' (Para.11,54). He has come to a state of stasis lower than that of Sordello's 'sweet and solitary year wasted'. Although he says the old Greek's prophecy is likely to be true: 'I shall not quit/ His chamber till I know what I desire' (Para.,11,63-4), he feels as if it could be the light wind singing over the sea that gives him this conviction - both transitory, traditionally false elements.

He now begins to see the value of 'An end, a rest!' (Para.,11,66) and the notion 'gathers strength by moments'. (Para.,11,67) He recognises himself as overtaxed and harrassed. Now he longs to rest 'Even in failure' (Para.,11,78), remembering with regret that once he hoped to rest 'in truth/And power and recompense' (Para.,11,78-9).He proceeds to analyse his present state - 'Has all/Been undergone for this?' (Para.,11,80-81) and goes on to realise a more positive side to his past actions: 'At worst I have performed my share of the task' (Para.,11,90). Now he believes this is enough - 'The rest is God's concern'. He sees himself as being in danger

of being waylaid by doubts. Just as a person within sight of a shrine has to go past sneering demons to get there, he now believes he must not succumb to the doubts that could overwhelm him at this stage - whereas in fact he should now be sufficiently powerful to overcome them.

However he does see how he has rejected sides of life that should have been important. Despite his earlier conviction that the spirit must be freed from within, he has imprisoned his own feelings of passion and affection - just as Festus foresaw. He has consented

fully

All passionate impulses [his nature's] soil was formed
To rear, should wither

(Para.,11,113-15)

At this time he did not foresee that he would come to look back and perceive 'faint blooms, viewless then' (Para.,11,119). He did not engage 'to root up loves so frail/[He] felt them not' (Para.,11,220-21). But now, seeing his life in emotional terms as a 'parched sand-waste' (Para.,11,118), he can see how he has previously stifled impulses to warmer affections. His urge to know has been like that of wolfish greed and he now sees how wrong it was to follow knowledge at the expense of affection:

This heart of mine was human once, or why recall
Einsiedeln, now, and Wurzburg which the Mayne
Forsakes her course to fold as with an arm?

(Para.,11,125-7)

The contrast between the Mayne and himself is clear. This thought leads him to the consideration of Festus. Paracelsus did not himself notice any 'vile lusts' (Para.,11,135) in his youth, but Festus observed a 'plague-spot' (as did the narrator of Sordello) which Paracelsus decided to ignore. He does not realise that his imposing of his will to make 'life consist of one idea' (Para.,11,140) has had the same effect as the vile lusts of a youth which

grow up and wind around a will
Till action was destroyed.

(Para.,11,136-7)

He sees that he has purged himself of such lusts and did not actually imagine that his 'one idea' can have had a similar effect on all his life. Since the morning when he 'determined to become/The greatest and most glorious man on earth' (Para.,11,149-50) he forgot the other sides of life, the 'small events' (Para.,11,143) he treasures in memory. He now sees his all-absorbing aim as tyrannous (Para.,11,152). In the past he thought he was heading for truth in its essence, but in his following of it he found:

all the beauty, all the wonder fell
On either side the truth, as its mere robe

(Para.,11,166-7)

At least now he has the understanding to realise that this is all he did see, the beauty surrounding, and hiding the truth. His following metaphor indicates the extent of his failure; the further he seeks, the further he is from the essence of what he seeks: the sun of 'that happy strip of land' (Para.,11,171) gleams fainter

as the waves grow rough,
And still more faint as the sea widens

(Para.,11,173-4)

In the end he finds himself only afforded light from a dead gulf's 'putrefying depths' (Para.,11,176); it is light which is self-defeating because self-regarding and self-generated. It comes from the depths of decay, not from the truth and it makes him 'sicken' (Para.,11,175). The light obscures rather than illuminates, it streaks the 'dead gulf'. The mood is similar to that in 'The Ancient Mariner' after the killing of the albatross, when the water is 'slimy' (AM,122), movement is impossible and the water is coloured like 'witch's oils' (AM,125). Paracelsus has sought truth in what appear the most exalted realms - and failed. He can only surmise:

God may take pleasure in confounding pride
By hiding secrets with the scorned and base

(Para.,11,180-81)

He believes that, had he paused to consider his progress, he would not have been in danger of losing his 'primal light'. The result of this on Paracelsus is bitterness (Para.,11,186). And he now anticipates further bitterness 'a deeper curse, an inner ruin' (Para.,11,187). His youth is now past and lost and all he finds for it are burning tears - he cannot even believe that another could succeed where he has failed (Para.,11,200).

He begins to wonder, if after all, he has mistaken his first impulse (Para.,11,221); he had seemed to be heading for 'knowledge...power, and recompense' (Para.,11,223) but now he feels as if he were 'fighting sleep off for death's sake' (Para.,11,228). The mood is very similar to that in 'Childe Roland' when, after an arduous search, the protagonist realises the futility of his search; the Tower he finds is 'blind as the fool's heart' (CR,182) and all he can claim for his pains is that he came to the Dark Tower.

In his despair Paracelsus clings to the power of mind - he cries out to God to save his mind, uncaring (as always) if any other part of him is crushed in his desperation to save his mind. The implication is that he thinks he has gained understanding worth retaining. However, in reflecting on his past, he finds that 'delight...Could find no place in it' (Para.,11,269-71). He longs for even a short spell left of his 'first energy' to bring together the truths he has gained. He has not however lost his faith in God: 'God, that created all things, can renew!' (Para.,11,272) and this belief ensures his continued striving despite everything. He sees no reason why reward should not spring out of toil in a metamorphic leap

as changed

As bursts the flower from earth and root and stalk?

(Para.,11,276-7)

In reading this, we are aware that the flower grows

gradually on the plant, and although we may be surprised by its first appearance, this has been gradually prepared for by the whole plant. Paracelsus does not believe punishment to be meaningful unless 'some sin/Be first detected' (Para.,11,278-9)so,thinking over his punishment, he feels nobody could ever have sinned as he has done.

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The tone of the meeting between Paracelsus and Aprile is unclear. Aprile's song mourns for unfulfilled powers and craves pardon for those who do not exert their powers. Aprile then greets Paracelsus in a mocking kind of way as king. Both have failed and each sees the other as perhaps in some way superior. Aprile however recognises Paracelsus' physical and emotional sterility in comparison with his own: 'Thine eyes are lustreless to mine' (Para.,11,354). He appears not to understand why Paracelsus has come to see him; he can see it is likely he has 'attained' since he has clearly resisted all physical or sensuous temptation. Aprile assumes he and others will be able to listen to Paracelsus' songs and will in particular not envy him but 'call deep silence' (Para.,11,375) for his songs.

On learning Aprile's quest 'to LOVE infinitely, and be loved' (Para.,11,385) Paracelsus assumes himself to be superior. But we have just seen in Aprile's last speech generosity that indicates he has accomplished some of his aim, whereas, as far as we can see, Paracelsus has arrived at self-doubt only. Both have failed ultimately for similar reasons: Aprile sees how

I could not curb
My yearnings to possess at once the full
Enjoyment, but neglected all the means
Of realising even the frailest joy,
Gathering no fragments to appease my want
Yet nursing up that want till thus I die -

(Para.,11,388-93)

Paracelsus has just described how he has neglected small pleasures and friendships for one huge end. Both their

ends of course should incorporate subservient elements. Aprile thinks that Paracelsus has not made the same mistake; he believes Paracelsus did not

grow mad to grasp

At once the prize long patient toil should claim

(Para.,11,493-4)

It is now clear to Aprile that one must not neglect whatever tools are available to one's purpose. Also he is different from Paracelsus in that he would love to share any success with others as friends (Para.,11,540); Paracelsus has wished to use the thought of his friends to sustain him; he had not thought of giving freely what he found to them. The motivation for gaining knowledge is different too. Paracelsus may not be too anxious to reassure his friends but in fact one of his reasons for pursuing knowledge is to share it with the world (though as we have seen, this is by no means a selfless aim). Aprile however, like a chameleon poet, would incorporate himself into the experience of others:

The lowest kind should not possess a hope,
A fear, but I'd be by him, saying better
Than he his heart's own language. I would live
For ever in the thoughts I thus explored

(Para.,11,558-61)

In this way Aprile will in one sense possess them

As a discoverer's memory is attached
To all he finds

(Para.,11,562-3)

Aprile is very misguided in his interpretation of how it has been for Paracelsus, and in his description of this he makes the latter very aware of his failure - he recognises his need to love in his cry,

Love me, henceforth, Aprile, while I learn
To love

(Para.,11,618-9)

The sentiment is reminiscent of that in 'The Good Morrow' - a revelatory new experience reveals the unreality of

life previously: 'We wake at length from weary dreams;
but both/Have slept in fairy-land' (Para.,11,620-21) echoes
Donne's lover's discovery:

were we not wean'd till then?...

Or snorted we in the seaven sleepers' den?

(The Good Morrow,2-4)

And Paracelsus recognises how they have both been limited:

I too have sought to KNOW as thou to LOVE-

Excluding love as thou refusedst knowledge

(Para.,11,624)

and recognises also how they complement each other: 'Are
we not halves of one dissevered world?' (Para.,11,634).
By learning from each other Paracelsus believes both can
be saved. (Para.,11,637) And, at Aprile's end, Paracelsus
sees how he can offer something real to him - the love of
friendship (Para.,11,655) - and after Aprile's death
Paracelsus can be comforted in the knowledge he has attained
(Para.,11,661).

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In the next scene, in his meeting with Festus, Paracelsus
is seen in caring conversation far more natural between
friends than his earlier troubled words with Festus
and Michal; it appears he really has learnt, even though
he detests change in Michal as the result of a general
principle - he wants to continue to remember her exactly
as she always was.

Again in his relationship with Festus, there are echoes
of Christ; earlier, as we have seen, he has aimed to do
some incredible deed for the world; now he behaves like
Christ returning:

Glorious? ay, this hair

These hands - nay, touch them, they are mine!

(Para.,111,83-4)

We remember the scene with Doubting Thomas - and of course
the contrast emphasises Paracelsus' relative extreme
lack of achievement. He has however learnt more generous

concern for others, as seen when he requests Festus to speak of himself (Para.,111,96).

Despite this, Festus finds it hard not see Paracelsus as humouring him, imagining Paracelsus in fact to be despising him. Paracelsus' answer to this describes how a dying man found harebells more precious than anything kings could give him (Para.,111,124). He now, thanks to Aprile, finds it more worthy to discuss the relative merits of pansies and violets than all the things 'fools' find to wonder at in him (Para.,111,130). He finds nothing sweeter than the news of friends he had found solace in. In his reunion with Festus, Paracelsus rediscovers smiles and laughter, and when he reveals this to Festus, the latter suddenly perceives that Paracelsus may be 'wretched' (Para.,111,186). And Paracelsus reveals how Festus has been right - about his misery; though not about his success. Festus has heard rumours of his achievements but Paracelsus tries to convince him that such are born of ignorance merely. He had expected Festus would look on him with 'piercing eye' (Para.,111,205) and Paracelsus now recognises how it was fear of Festus that prevented his coming to Einsiedeln. He confesses some of his doubt, in particular his belief that he is a quack, to Festus who however sees these fears as a result of nervous exhaustion (Para.,111,305). The result of this exchange is that Paracelsus is now cynical about Festus. Paracelsus doubts Festus' ability to be realistic over his friend's failure, particularly as the information Festus has heard has been from 'the common voice' (Para.,111,346).

When Paracelsus insists on his failure, Festus' reaction is of disbelief - he instantly assumes that what Paracelsus means is that his hopes have yet to be realised, not, as Paracelsus means, that he has actually failed. Paracelsus wishes to change the subject, seeing himself as a 'sad fool' to have stumbled on it (Para.,111,370). He thinks that, in introducing the subject of his failure, his mind has been confused.

At this point Paracelsus acknowledges the help Festus would have given him, comparing him with the saints, but brooding over the fact that Aprile was not able to help:

I know you would have helped me - why not he,
My strange competitor in enterprise,
Bound for the same end by another path

(Para.,111,379-81)

We may well see how Aprile, who has attempted to find 'the same end by another path' as Paracelsus, has been, like Paracelsus, too limited to help anyone. The time he has helped another has been in his dying words to Paracelsus. Festus now appears Paracelsus' 'sole friend' (Para.,111,388). Paracelsus, with this realisation, becomes interested in small details like that of the 'rear-mice' (Para.,111,391); it is significant that he suddenly uses vivid and precise imagery in a way he does not when describing events manifestly of more seriousness. The vividness of:

Do the rear-mice still
Hang like a fretwork on the gate

(Para.,111,391-2)

springs out to our ears after so much blander description and makes us believe that such details are the important ones in life. Paracelsus has not been, to his own mind, 'trifling' - he is concerned with the small, domestic, significant details now only after so much failure in his pursuit of so 'large' an aim. He is indeed distressed at the 'break-down' of his 'general aims' (Para.,111,412). In petty ways, his failure has been due, as in his example of the prince in the treatment of whom Paracelsus tried to brush aside quackery, to misunderstanding caused by ignorance. When he succeeds in worldly terms, it is, he believes, because he happens to 'attract/
A crowd to Basil' (Para.,111,486-7). In describing his failure to Festus, Paracelsus attempts to show that

there's no great wonder after all
That, while I fill the class-room and attract
A crowd to Basil, I get leave to stay

(Para.,111,484-6)

He has attempted to tell Festus of examples where he has been a failure, but Festus is bewildered and exclaims

surely you must feel how vague and strange
These speeches sound.

(Para.,111,498-9)

Paracelsus' response to this is to insist in the strongest terms to Festus that his life has been wasted:

I am assured, at length, those hopes were vain;
That truth is just as far from me as ever;
That I have thrown my life away

(Para.,111,500-502)

and, moreover, it is too late to change things. Here, we see just how much he has changed. He now, unknowingly, mocks his own former hopes in his reply to Festus' hopeful 'God wills not...' (Para.,111,509). He is even irritated by such an attitude - as implied by the words 'constant talk' and 'as they style it' in the following:

Now, 't is this I most admire -
The constant talk men of your stamp keep up
Of God's will, as they style it; one would swear
Man had but merely to uplift his eye,
And see the will in question charactered
On the heaven's vault

(Para.,111,510-15)

Paracelsus sees himself, after all his searching, as ignorant; God is in control and Paracelsus cannot hope to see the patterns of things:

I know as little
Why I deserve to fail, as why I hoped
Better things in my youth. I simply know
I am no master here, but trained and beaten
Into the path I tread

(Para.,111,522-6)

Worse than mere submission to his path, Paracelsus is now capable of enjoying 'Pleasures that once were pains' (Para.,111,535). Festus had anticipated a 'plague-spot' (Para.,1,614) and indeed Paracelsus' description

of the pleasures ' A host of petty vile delights'
(Para.,111,538) he now takes instead of his 'dead aims'
(Para.,111,539) sound like those of a 'hideous blotch'

Where tall trees used to flourish, from their roots
Springs up a fungous brood sickly and pale,
Chill mushrooms coloured like a corpse's cheek

(Para.,111,541-3)

The image is anticipatory of the sick nightmare landscape of 'Childe Roland', which also led the protagonist to no emotional or moral gain. Perhaps worse than for Childe Roland (who is at least free to sound his proclamation), these pleasures are now like an accustomed trap for Paracelsus - he makes the analogy:

the iron ring
Festering about a slave's neck grows at length
Into the flesh it eats

(Para.,111,535-7)

This also implies that to remove his 'pleasures' would also remove part of himself to his detriment; if the slave's collar were removed, it would actually cause more damage to his neck than leaving it there.

Whatever Paracelsus says, Festus interprets as being in some sense praiseworthy; his response to Paracelsus' disillusionment is to suggest that in fact his friend is being realistic. This has no effect on Paracelsus, who has gone from one unrealistic extreme - of over-reaching - to the other - of feeling it would be consistent to die. He regrets his past but at least feels it is worth shuffling through as a result of Aprile's persuasion that he should use the gains he had, however imperfect, in serving mankind (Para.,111,592). Paracelsus is cynical about what attracts the crowds to him since only a 'poor dozen' is likely to 'draw profit from my pains' (Para.,111,637). One reason for this is Paracelsus' manner - he recognises in himself 'small skill to speak' (Para.,111,646) and in Sordello this was to become a central concern for Browning - the contrast between the internal visionary side of man and his inability

to communicate what he perceives: 'to possess was one thing - to display/Another.' says Paracelsus with feeling (Para.,111,654-5). And now his soul is incapable of change; although his 'darling ends/Are proved impossible' (Para.,111,674-5) he still goes on perceiving things in his former way, despite the fact that such perceptions have their charm to none but him. He says:

I still must hoard and heap and class all truths
With one ulterior purpose: I must know

(Para.,111,705-6)

His ultimate end is still to 'know' and in asserting this he rejects any idea of beauty's intrinsic nature being of value to him. He is also rejecting the knowledge of his failure of which he has just been telling Festus. Although his earlier attempts to know have turned out self-defeating and even harmful to himself, he remains stubbornly obsessed with his pursuit of knowledge - and his description quoted above of how he goes about it implies it is with the greed of a treasure-hoarder. The rhythmic echo of Keats emphasizes the idealistic inverse:

I cannot feed on beauty for the sake
Of beauty only, nor can drink in balm
From lovely objects for their loveliness

(Para.,111,701-3)

is strongly reminiscent in tone of - and answers Keats':

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all you need to know

(Ode on a Grecian Urn,49-50)

When Festus suggest that Paracelsus' willingness to return to his earlier path indicates that 'all this consciousness/Of failure is assumed' (Para.,111,723-4), Paracelsus' aggressive reply indicates perhaps his guilty recognition that Festus is right - and also his inability to face a real 'truth' when it is embarrassingly near the bone. He goes on angrily to point out that one of the worst features of his failure is his inability to stop his fruitless task; he stresses to Festus:

You know not what temptation is, nor how
'T is like to ply men in the sickliest part.

(Para.,111,764-5)

In all his travels Paracelsus has also failed to develop any perception of love; he informs Festus that overriding admiration overlooks faults. This is a more superficial understanding than Festus' insistence that

love is never blind, but rather
Alive to every the minutest spot
Which mars its object

(Para.,111,832-4)

Festus insists that he is not blind:

I call your sin exceptional;
It springs from one whose life has passed the bounds
Prescribed to life

(Para.,111,861-3)

Paracelsus now reveals that he has a humbler sense of how worldly achievement works than we could at first imagine - it is anticipatory of the image of how historical action takes place in Sordello in the famous metaphor of the seaweed that joins with and breaks from the whole mass of weed. Paracelsus, like Sordello, now recognises profit in being part of mankind's progress:

as the sea
Waits ages in its bed till some one wave
Out of the multitudinous mass, extends
The empire of the whole, some feet perhaps,
Over the strip of sand which could confine
Its fellows so long time: thenceforth the rest,
Even to the meanest, hurry in at once,
And so much is clear gained

(Para.,111,874-81)

So now Paracelsus insists he will be content if all his labours

Suffice to make such inroad and procure
A wider range for thought

(Para.,111,883-4)

He recognises now that he is already achieving this - seeing himself as preceding his age (Para.,111,887) - as will Sordello. However, he doubts his service to mankind since what he offers is not appropriate for others at their particular stage of development. Festus' solution here is practical; he recommends that Paracelsus use the printing press to ensure his work will not be wasted in the future (Para.,111,915). But he still believes Paracelsus will 'be all-revealed' (Para.,111,920), an ambition no longer shared by Paracelsus himself. Paracelsus agrees with Festus it may be worth publishing some of his work, his

many secrets, caught
While bent on nobler prize, - perhaps a few
Prime principles which may conduct to much
(Para.,111,925-7)

However, the sort of knowledge he considers more important he has learnt only 'hints' (Para.,111,924) of and these are 'vast, shadowy' (Para.,111,923). There are hints of 'the unbounded aim [Paracelsus] once pursued' (Para.,111,924) and he here seems to have lost hope of resuming this pursuit.

This dialogue indicates the pain for Paracelsus in the contrast of values - between the ambitions of students, his admiration (and attempts to forestall any regret this admiration has not been of himself) of Luther and the potential for fulfillment in gazing upon a lovely scene. Paracelsus has lost his joy in nature. Festus speaks of the wind that 'slips whispering from bough to bough' (Para.,111,1003) but, in response, Paracelsus refers to the 'moaning wind' (Para.,111,1007). His mood is totally despairing, feeling he has lost 'love, hope, fear, faith' (Para.,111,1028) which 'make humanity'.

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The next part shows Paracelsus again 'aspiring' and therefore calling Festus to see him. But in worldly terms he was cast out when he tried to teach, rather than amaze the crowd. Like Sordello, his insights were ahead

of his time. But now Paracelsus feels intense contact with him would contaminate Festus. Paracelsus does not know whether to 'sink beneath such ponderous shame' (Para., 1V, 157) or 'to lower/ [his] old pretensions even as Basil dictates' (Para., 1V, 163-4). In this latter role, falsehood would be involved with his subordination. He would have to compromise himself

To drop into the rank [Basil's] wits assign me
And live as they prescribe, and make that use
Of my poor knowledge which their rules allow
(Para., 1V, 164-6)

This would result in his inner resentment. He describes how in such resentment he could

deck false systems in truth's garb,
And tangle and entwine mankind with error
(Para., 1V, 172-3)

or he could 'mope/Into a shade through thinking'
or else 'drowse/Into a dreamless sleep and so die off'
(Para., 1V, 175-7). His problem is similar to Sordello's, when having to compromise in Mantua. However Paracelsus rejects this, insisting he will set out 'once more, embracing/[His] earliest aims again!' (Para., 1V, 179-80). However he will not follow the old means that made him a laughing-stock, even though they had their own beauty.

What Paracelsus terms 'light-hearted' (Para., 1V, 223) now, Festus sees as menace:

rather let me gaze on that despair
Than hear these incoherent words and see
This flushed cheek and intensely-sparkling eye
(Para., 1V, 220-22)

Festus points out that Paracelsus himself has now declared the aims for which he strove to be 'impracticable' (Para., 1V, 230). But now Paracelsus declares that he will 'accept all helps' (Para., 1V, 235) and sees how rash he was to despise them before. And his aim has also changed:

I seek to know and to enjoy at once
Not one without the other as before
(Para., 1V, 240-41)

He now sees every joy as gain, backing up this thought by the memory of a bright youth when success seemed 'surest' (Para., 1V, 257). His mind is inconsistent however - later in the same speech he asserts:

sickness lends
An aid; it being, I fear, the source of all
We boast of: mind is nothing but disease,
And natural health is ignorance

(Para., 1V, 276-9)

The good symptom Festus sees in this cynicism indicates his disillusionment with his friend's former ideas and clear-sighted rejection of his fantasies. Festus sees Paracelsus' new aims as being due to vexation 'by the intrusion of base views' (Para., 1V, 335) and adds:

the delights you fain would think
The superseders of your nobler aims,
Though ordinary and harmless stimulants,
Will ne'er content you

(Para., 1V, 345-8)

Paracelsus wishes even so to pass over the fact that he 'once despised men' (Para., 1V, 348). He, like Sordello, is in the process of learning to accommodate his aspirations to what is actually possible in the world. In his view, it is the nature of growing old which allows him to compromise:

time passes o'er,
And humbler spirits accept what we refuse

(Para., 1V, 351-2)

In the end one accepts comforting delights:

we cannot long retain
Bitter contempt which urges us at first
To hurl [comfort] back, but hug it to our breast
And thankfully retire

(Para., 1V, 353-6)

Paracelsus' wish to 'enjoy and know' is in his description not as much of a compromise as Festus has suggested.

I told you once, I cannot now enjoy,
Unless I deem my knowledge gains through joy;
Nor can I know, but straight, warm tears reveal
My need of linking also joy to knowledge:
So, on I drive, enjoying all I can,
And knowing all I can

(Para., 1V, 359-64)

But still, in this speech, he indicates he is studying,
and this study even has a physical effect on him:

my frame
Trembles, my forehead's veins swell out, my hair
Tingles for triumph

(Para., 1V, 384-6)

He dreads the moment of memory, looking all the way
back to the time when he thought 'that God/Means good
to me' (Para., 1V, 401). Festus asks why then Paracelsus
has not questioned himself as to why he has not moved on
from what he sees as failures in this way:

I have stopped half-way,
And wrongly given the first-fruits of my toil
To objects little worthy of the gift.
Why linger round them still? Why clench my fault?

(Para., 1V, 422-5)

Paracelsus now describes such thought as 'some such
airy project' (Para., 1V, 436). He has felt as those in
his song, who feel their quest in vain when they

awoke with sudden start
From our deep dream, and knew, too late,
How bare the rock, how desolate,
Which had received our precious freight

(Para., 1V, 515-8)

In Paracelsus' interpretation, what has happened is:

The sad rhyme of the men who proudly clung
To their first fault, and withered in their pride

(Para., 1V, 526-7)

Festus offers his friend 'peace, if not joy' (Para., 1V, 532)
if he returns with him but Paracelsus rejects this,

saying it would not be possible to return to a former state,

A spotless child sleeps on the flowering moss-
'T is well for him, but when a sinful man,
Envyng such slumber, may desire to put
His guilt away, shall he return at once
To rest by lying there?

(Para.,1V,535-9)

He does not believe a 'mossy pillow blue with violets' (Para.,1V,543) would be fitting for him, but rather, in a Beddoes - like description, 'A stone floor one may writhe on like a worm' (Para.,1V,542). He shows therefore that he believes his future is deservedly that of one both helpless and barren.

Festus now points how Paracelsus' earlier 'trust/Was self-delusion at the best ' (Para.,1V,564-5). Paracelsus has been supremely arrogant 'content to say/Most courtly praises!' (Para.,1V,572-3) while God let him do as he pleased:

None

Could trace God's will so plain as you, while your's
Remained implied in it

(Para.,1V,574-6)

Now, according to Festus, Paracelsus 'cannot brook' the fact that 'God's service is established here/As he determines fit' (Para.,1V,578-9). Paracelsus believes that God's purpose will be achieved if humans are glorious in reflection of his glory (Para.,1V,602).

After all their converse on the soul and Paracelsus, Festus reveals, in what appears an afterthought in the scene, that Michal is dead. All of a sudden the emphasis changes to the purely human and Paracelsus tells Festus of his conviction that the soul does not wholly die - the first time we see his learning used in a way which might genuinely benefit another person. As Paracelsus says, Michal died while he had been hoping and despairing 'As though it mattered how the farce plays out' (Para.,1V,687).

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There is a gap of thirteen years before the friends meet again and Paracelsus is dying. Festus' description of the past short while indicates his deep love for his friend, regretting that he has not been successful. His instincts are those of any friend: 'Let him but know me, only speak to me!' (Para.,V,82). When Paracelsus awakes he now sees himself in a most unsuccessful light as

The ignorant and incapable fool who rushed
Madly upon a work beyond his wits

(Para.,V,149-50)

He journeys through some of his past thoughts as though speaking to Aprile, in a trance, asking God for mercy, saying life is pointless if there is no afterlife; he must reap some profit from his toils. He shows his fears of scorn and of human mockery in the frantic 'shut these scorched/Eyelids and keep those mocking faces out.' (Para.,V,323-4). The jeers have crept into his 'very brain' and his 'scorched' eyelids indicate his state of misery, what he has seen has been a kind of hell-fire. When he realises Festus' presence, he sees him first as his judge - but Festus' response is to try to reassure him and to be humble beside him:

That God shall take thee to his breast, dear spirit,
Unto his breast, be sure!

(Para.,V,383-4)

Festus' idyllic poem frees Paracelsus in a way similar to the Ancient Mariner's release on blessing the water-snaker:

they loose my heart, those simple words;
Its darkness passes, which nought else could touch:
Like some dark snake that force may not expel,
Which glideth out to music sweet and low.

(Para.,V,447-50)

The violent and unpredictable becomes tamed and sweet in its association with what has tamed it; it is as though Paracelsus has been given a most gentle exorcism of his twisted thoughts.

From now on, this feeling is emphasized as he reviews

his life in a tone of acceptance of God's will and intention, demonstrating his understanding of Aprile's teaching, of 'the worth of love in man's estate' (Para.,V,855). From the time of meeting Aprile his heart became wiser

To trace love's faint beginnings in mankind
To know even hate is but a mask of love's,
To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill-success

(Para.,V,872-5)

At this point we may recall his new interest in 'human' details on meeting Festus after Aprile's death. In addition, as in Pauline, the love of God becomes in the end the most important value in life and hope in God, rather than in mankind, the true end of all seeking. When Paracelsus has expressed his trust:

I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day

(Para.,V,901-3)

Festus recognises that he is able to die at peace. The problem for the reader is that this conclusion comes without our really having witnessed this spiritual side of his progress. His account of his new-found peace only sounds convincing in light of the lyrical passages on the beauties of nature, which have occurred spasmodically. He has set out to know but has learnt nothing important he could not have learnt had he stayed put geographically. Indeed, he has missed much in terms of human warmth and knowledge in his attempt. His release of heart at Festus' descriptions of nature's beauties is something similar to that at moments of forgiveness in Coleridge or Wordsworth, when, as the protagonist blesses, so in that moment is he blessed. In the course of his life, Paracelsus has been too concerned to gain personal glory from his revealing of God's to realise anything so simple.

Notes

1. Laurence Poston III, Browning's Career to 1841: The Theme of Time and the Problem of Form (Browning Institute Studies, 1975), p.86
2. Morse Peckham, 'Browning and Romanticism', Robert Browning: Writers and their Background ed. I. Armstrong, p.26
3. Earl Hilton, 'Browning's Sordello as a Study of the Will', PMLA, 69, 1954
4. Northrop Frye, A Study of English Romanticism (New York, 1968), p.46
5. Shelley, 'Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude' - Translation of 'Nondum amabam, et amare amabam, quarebam quid amarem, amans amare'. - Confessions St Augustus
6. E.D.H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry - Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning and Arnold (Connecticut, 1963), p.72

SORDELLO

Rossetti claimed he had no problems when he first read Sordello; he was unusual. Mrs. Carlyle declared she had got to the end without discovering what manner of thing Sordello was. Tennyson found only two lines comprehensible, the first and the last: 'Who will, may hear Sordello's story told' and 'Who would has heard Sordello's story told', and both were untrue.¹ This century, Philip Drew states authoritatively, 'to a discussion of subjects already complex Browning adds a complexity of language which obscures his thought without adequate compensating enrichment, even though he is writing a kind of poetry which requires the reader's full understanding at every level'.² His problem with this poem is essentially that of Carlyle with much poetry - 'Why make it jingle if it can be spoken clearly?'³

When thinking about Sordello then, one of the first dilemmas for most critics could be summed up in one question: is the complication of language necessary due to the complication of ideas? This question becomes the more pressing on reading the poem and finding so much of it concerned with the question of how language is used by a poet in the world, and how accurately he is able to communicate his perceptions. Herbert Tucker in 1980 approached the poem from an angle rather different from that of Drew or earlier critics: 'Stuttering interruptions, checks, anticipations, and postponements give Sordello a stubbornly different meaning. They are its way of meaning.'⁴ He presents the other side of the coin from Mrs. Orr's; had she been writing this decade, her particular difficulties might well have encouraged her to lean towards the kind of criticism used by Tucker, as can be seen from this extract:

Enough has been said to show that the conception of the character is very abstruse on the intellectual and poetic side; that it presents us with states

of thought and feeling, remote from common experience, and which no language could make entirely clear; and unfortunately the style is in itself so obscure that we cannot judge whether it is the expression or the idea which we fail to grasp.⁵

Mrs. Orr is among the readers Tucker mentions 'who expect the presentable unities and stable meanings of more orthodox works.'⁶ In Sordello 'fixed meaning is often simply not there to be had'.⁷

Mrs. Orr realised this, though she was not repelled in the way Tucker thinks such a reader would be, but unlike Tucker's search for meaning in the very mode of writing, ~~her assumption was that the meaning would~~ be as it were hidden beneath the difficult language. Of course Mrs. Orr was writing before more modern theories, based on anthropological studies, that 'meaning' could be seen to be pre-verbal, given linguistic expression by a poet - or writer - and then left to the reader or listener to unwrap again, in which process he would attempt to understand the non- or pre-verbal meaning originally meant. Thus, it could be said, Tucker and other modern writers are likely to have this - arguably more sophisticated - approach to the very location of meaning. Mrs. Orr would not have had such theories as points of reference when discussing Sordello. She writes discursively of what could be termed extreme succinctness that, 'The poem was written under the dread of diffuseness, which had just then taken possession of Mr Browning's mind, and we have sometimes to struggle through a group of sentences out of which he has so laboured to squeeze every unnecessary word, that their grammatical connection is broken up, and they present a compact mass of meaning which without previous knowledge it is almost impossible to continue.'⁸ She further explains the effect of this: 'he contented himself with two words where he would rather have used ten. The harsh and involved passages in Sordello, which add so much to the remoteness of its thought, were the first consequences of this lesson'.⁹

Tucker, by contrast, states succinctly, 'The way to meaning in Sordello is through its style, not around or above or in spite of it'.¹⁰ The style is an important part of the meaning, and his chapter on Sordello makes convincing reading. In approaching Sordello however it would be impossible to ignore Browning's own note to Milsand, 'my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study'.¹¹ The style he uses for his subject of course affects the narrative meaning profoundly, but this very statement encourages the reader to seek that meaning. The Oxford editors' attempt 'to render the poem a little more intelligible'¹² is welcome!

It can be argued that the stylistic 'problems' are necessary in order to convey more fully an understanding of the developing mind in Sordello. Language cannot adequately express Sordello's perceptions:

perceptions whole, like that he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
As language: thought may take perception's place
But hardly co-exist in any case.

(Sordello, 11, 589)

The dilemma is now well-known; it is the problem in Graves' Cool Web:

Children are dumb to say how hot the day is,
How hot the scent is of the summer rose,
How dreadful the black wastes of evening sky,
How dreadful the tall soldiers drumming by.

But we have speech, to chill the angry day,
And speech, to dull the rose's cruel scent.
We spell away the overhanging night,
We spell away the soldiers and the fright.¹³

Contemporary poets are still very aware of this dilemma. Anne Stevenson writes, 'For most of our lives we are not at the mercy of language, but at the mercy of feelings. Language relieves us of the tyranny of feelings. Feelings,

however, are infinitely more complex than language, in which we can only think. The language of poetry is language which comes nearest to thinking (imaging, sounding like, symbolizing) what we feel'.¹⁴ Sordello's search for a language adequate to his perceptions is well described by Clyde de C.Ryals¹⁵, and I will look at this area in more detail later.

However appropriate in the end we may feel Browning's use of language to be, we cannot escape the fact that it has been the major source of problems for most readers of Sordello. As pointed out in The Book, the Ring and the Poet, 'Many Victorians - notably the reviewers - found something supercilious, unsocial, even hostile, in its obscurity. Others, like Macready, feared for the poet's mind. More recently Stewart W.Holmes has also feared for the poet's mind: Browning's obscurity is traceable in part to the difficulty all prophetic poets experience in communicating the deeply subjective images of the unconscious, in part to a psychic malady - he was a semantic stutterer. He felt God required him to speak on high philosophic matters, and yet, because of an irregular early education, he lacked the discipline and training to develop an adequate, consistent vocabulary. Certain confusions in the use of words like 'body' 'soul' 'mind' and 'matter' led to blocks which explain his headaches when writing, his irritability - and the obscurity of Sordello.'¹⁶ How irritated the individual becomes with the ambiguities will to some extent influence her or his opinion as to their function, how integral they are to the interpretation of Sordello. If approaching the poem with the assumption that such ambiguities are necessary to the poem's meaning, the reader is less likely to become irritated, and far more likely to be drawn into the fascination of its complexities, and allow time for the many beauties some nineteenth century critics lingered on gratefully even while admitting the poem's problems.

The other difficulties in Sordello are part of the problem of the language in which it is told. Whether we believe the

background to be decorative, integral, atmospheric and/or accurate, it is still not easy to understand precisely what is going on in the historical, narrative sense. Browning himself in his 1863 note to Milsand stated, 'The historical background was purposely of no more importance than a background requires'.¹⁷ Lee Erickson, while not particularly troubled by the difficulties of understanding the 'historical side' of the poem, does describe some of these; he states that 'the last three books narrate Sordello's political career and its failure in a relatively straightforward manner - that is, if one allows for the clutter of historical detail, the picture of Ferrara ravaged by war, and the long, static, explanatory monologues of Sordello, Palma, and Salinguerra, which are either delivered or paraphrased in this part of the poem'.¹⁸ It is difficult to assess just how far we may safely regard the 'historical' aspects of Sordello as atmospheric background and so dismiss, or slightly better, skim, where we cannot understand, and how far a full understanding of what was going on at the time enhances our understanding of the main characters and thus our full appreciation. The times being described were confused and volatile and different Italian authorities produce some variations in their accounts. These accounts certainly help one to understand what is going on - unlike Browning's condensed version in Sordello itself. However, it could be that the narrator's way of describing the events as it were to an audience of initiates is so appealing that we forgive the obscurity this inevitably causes. In any case, the impression of confusion is accurate, and Sordello is anyway not only concerned with a poet in his time, but the poet's position during any time of change. Philip Drew is not alone in wondering if the obscurity is there simply because of Browning's immaturity; he believes that this was the misjudgement of a relatively inexperienced writer: 'Sordello notoriously demands a detailed knowledge of an obscure period of Italian history, but this is an early poem, and Browning thereafter rarely makes the mistake of over-estimating so crudely the reader's power to grasp allusion'.¹⁹ Whyte says the same thing -

more favourably: 'It has been pointed out that Browning's obscurity is very often the result of his very grasp of the subject, and this is conspicuously true of Sordello'.²⁰ Church was less forgiving; it would be interesting to know exactly which paintings he had in mind when he declared Browning's landscapes were like 'the background of some great Umbrian or Venetian painter - with perhaps an unintelligible foreground and action'.²¹ Perhaps an Ucello battlescene could be thought of in connection with Sordello, considering the complexity of interlocking and vital figures; this would not suggest 'background only'. Whyte however partially shares Church's opinion here, suggesting that the historical background 'frequently intrudes' into the foreground 'and, in consequence, what should only be of secondary interest takes the first place. In the same way the prominence given to Salinguerra often obscures Sordello and makes us forget who is the leading character'.²² Of course we may no longer agree with the need for a main character to be prominent in the way expected by Whyte, but nevertheless these criticisms help the reader understand some of the reasons for the poem's complexity.

Mrs. Orr was somewhat more generous in her view on the 'historical' part of Sordello. She wrote that it 'forms a large and moving background, which often disputes our attention with the central figure, and sometimes even absorbs it, projecting itself as it were in an artistic middle distance, in which fact and fancy are blended - while the mental distance through which the hero moves, is, in its way, as restless and crowded as the material'.²³ E.D.H. Johnson supported the idea of the background being integral and went beyond this, pointing out that Browning may have said the history is a background, but that Browning's backgrounds were of great importance; he was a master in atmosphere and setting.²⁴ I agree since the reader need only think of the natural and unnatural images in 'Childe Roland', and how they enhance understanding of the protagonist's mind in that poem, to realise, before even reading Sordello, how far the background may help

us in our knowledge of the protagonist. As shown by these critics' opinions, how far the background enriches the foreground in Sordello is a matter of dispute. Columbus and Kemper put well the 'favourable' side of the argument: 'Sordello's reader must permit himself to be buffeted, rhetorically and intellectually, through a space-time continuum and themes that become unbearably intertwined. And precisely this is a part of Browning's meaning'.²⁵ As they point out, Sordello's relationship - and lack of it - with the 'background' is crucial. It is similarly important in his development to learn that the poppy cannot feel with him (Columbus and Kemper effectively point out the snap in the narrator's tone in the line 'As if the poppy felt with him'²⁶) as to learn that he cannot impose his will on mankind. Again, the line quoted by Columbus and Kemper demonstrates the narrator's impatience: 'Impose his will on mankind, he (the fool!)'.²⁷ (Sordello, IV, 276). We need some idea of the tangled times in which he moves in order to understand the complete futility of Sordello's attempt at this point.

Throughout the poem numerous tiny details would not be so significant if we did not see the disorder of the times in which Sordello lived. A question like 'But how so order life?' (Sordello, VI, 573) becomes more urgent if we remember the chaos for individuals in the world as described in the 'chokeweed' passage (Sordello, I, 205-237). In this complex section (well analysed in the Oxford Edition p. 205-6) the cliffs seem to be the Ghibellines and the chokeweed the Guelfs. Basically, it is an account of the complicated nature of power and progress in the world, as difficult to sort out as to see what precisely is happening when weed is tangled over the sea. Only a shock can disperse it, until some other growth starts. The unsettled feel to the particular historical period, the muddle over Guelf and Ghibelline and family allegiances and so on makes Sordello's dilemma as a poet more extreme, and explains Naddo's position as cynical critic perhaps. The feeling is of a time of 'here today, gone tomorrow' whether in Sordello's winning the prize from Eglamor and

then eventually losing his inspiration or in the rapid rise and fall of political factions. The political volatility echoes, and interacts with, the volatility of Sordello and the speaker.

That said, it cannot be denied that the historical 'side' of Sordello presents a problem; the events are unclear for a start, the historical period one of constant change and the entangling of event and thought does little to clarify what is going on at the narrative level. The Book, the Ring and the Poet gives both further justification for some of the confusion and explanation for the reader's likely frustration: 'Surely [Browning] could have been so very obscure only on principle. Within the poem he suggests the principle. What is needed is a "brother's speech... where an accent's change gives each the other's soul". By one of those paradoxes so characteristic of impressionism, he was sacrificing clarity to gain vividness and immediacy, using the colloquial, dramatic language of a man spontaneously recounting his story to intimates. Hence his maddening tendency to explain thirteenth century politics as though the reader already understood them perfectly. Hence the bewildering informality in pronoun reference and the blasé, stultifying violations of logical and chronological sequence'.²⁸ So, as the authors imply, the problem of comprehension is intensified by the fact that Browning was systematically trying to say everything at once. Lee Erickson gives a brief account of how this happens in the poem, as Browning darts backwards and forwards through Sordello's time and also from then to 'now'. He goes on to show how this confuses our sense of to whom we are listening: 'In order to put us within Sordello's poetic consciousness, Browning presents the story as if it were taking place in a dream. Historical details intrude oddly into the account of Sordello's youth at Goito; the difference between Browning's, the narrator's, and Sordello's consciousness is rarely clear; the subjective, cameralike changing of scenes without a controlling narrative voice...unsettle the reader; and the syntax and "para-grammar" of the poem often make it almost

impossible to read for sense'.²⁹

How much of the narrator is Browning, how much Sordello, how much all three are interrelated, is fascinating and important in the poem even where difficult to follow. If Sordello's viewpoint is given, the reader does not necessarily need to equate that with any authorial intention. In the next chapter I intend to discuss some sections where we may see the narrator's attitude in contrast to Sordello's, or Browning putting Sordello's in contrast to the narrator's so we may see Sordello's naivety. The narrator is a different problem - Tucker goes so far as to refer to the narrator as 'Browning' throughout his Sordello chapter. Other critical issues can be found in Browning's treatment of the narrator, how Sordello echoes the narrator, how in controlling his audience the narrator fails to heed his own advice to Sordello eg. in telling him he cannot impose his will on mankind. The narrator's musing in Venice could be seen to echo Sordello's retreat to Goito - with the difference that, in leaving his tale, the narrator is still busy thinking. If we read this as deliberate contrast between the narrator and Sordello, it modifies our judgement of Sordello which it need not if we read it as a similarly spontaneous break by Browning himself. Though it is possible that neither judgement totally precludes the other.

Perhaps in the end it is the all-inclusiveness of the poem that has caused the most problems to its readers and critics - one cannot pin it down to any 'linear' development or developments. It is about a poet writing about a poet writing about a poet. It is about a certain period of Italian history. It is about the significance of a poet in that world - and in any world of change. It is about an individual's search for fulfillment and communication - in the context of a poet's, Sordello's, search for these. It can also be read as a - or the - transitional poem between Romantic and Victorian values and about poetic status. In Browning's career it seems the turning-point between the 'monologue' Pauline, the formal dialogues of Paracelsus and

the more naturalistic Dramatis Personae and Men and Women poems. Tucker believes the poem is limited simply by its readers: 'Readers in search of orthodox coherence, who conceive "truth" or "meaning" as a noun rather than as a verb, may find it in Paracelsus if they are willing to be nominal readers and to accept a reduction of the poem. But in much of Sordello Browning has made such reduction impossible; fixed meaning is often simply not there to be had'.³⁰ Tucker himself provides some excellent interpretative accounts of some sections of the poem, but these can help without altering the importance of his statement. Understanding the poem bit by bit is necessary in one way, but does not make it come across as a coherent whole - Tucker has more of note to say of its readers: 'Time would seem to have taken its revenges on Browning precisely because most readers of the poem since its publication have been, like Sordello, eager for the fixity of present meaning and for the integrity of spacial form. Yet it is possible to interpret the official critical neglect of Sordello as a backhanded confirmation of an intuition that lies at the heart of the poem: that spacial and temporal modes of meaning create and answer to entirely different expectations. Sordello is notorious for disappointing the expectations of coherence that readers bring to it. By the same token, however, the generally disappointing quality of criticism written on the poem is due to the unwillingness of readers to submit to its different expectations'.³¹ Tucker's chapter proceeds to describe some of those, well analysing the poem's themes of deferment, constant renewal and so on. While agreeing with this aspect of his approach to the poem, I feel it is nevertheless important to understand the poem in the more 'conventional' way as much as possible; I am not certain that Tucker could so happily make such statements if he had not spent time working out the syntax and meaning of the difficult passages for himself. Lewis Smith's point is akin to Tucker's and indicates something of the excitement of any reader in tackling Sordello: 'The artistic insufficiency of some aspects of [Browning's] work, when comparison is made with that of Tennyson's, is to be accounted for by the same circumstance of his being a

discoverer, an investigator, and possibly a forerunner'.³²

--o--

'the incidents in the development of a soul:
little else is worth study'.³³

Sordello is overtly about Sordello; E.H.Thomson says that 'to examine [the poem] in the light of psychology is surely the method which will best embrace every other point of critical view, for Sordello is the perfect study of artistic temperament as embodied in the personality of one man'.³⁴ It is also, as we see from the poem's opening, about one man's attempt to show us Sordello. The narrator attempts to show us Sordello's quest and, in doing so, cannot keep himself 'out of view' (Sordello,1,14). One effect of this is to remind us that, when the narrator is speaking of Sordello as poet, as questing, he himself will sympathize with the emotions and states of mind described and invest his tale with more authority. Indeed the poem's opening already gives us some confidence in his authoritative vision. The scene may well, as Stempel suggested, be like that of a diorama.³⁵ Not far removed from this image is that of a seer with a crystal ball; the summoning of Verona gives this impression. After its first appearance the narrator shows how he has to

see the dim

Abysmal past divide its hateful surge

(Sordello,1,18-19)

The picture is reminiscent of a cloudy image in a crystal. When the picture is in danger of fading due to his digressing to other topics, the narrator has the power to re-invoke it (Sordello,1,59). The third time Verona appears it is with the drama associated with djinns! We are given a sense of the violence needed for full, imaginative transportation of this scene of the past to the narrator's mind:

Lo, the past is hurled

In twain: up-thrust, out-staggering on the world,

Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears

Its outline, kindles at the core, appears

Verona .

(Sordello,1,73-7)

This, together with his banishing of harmful spirits, asserts his confidence in his ability to show us the substance of Sordello:

For the moment I intend to turn to Sordello himself, his quest, and then the discussion of the nature of the poet in the poem. I have briefly mentioned the narrator here to indicate that the account of Sordello and the other issues connected with him is intimately connected with the narrator's own character and events in the narrator's existence. When we see the narrator musing creatively in Venice (Sordello, 111, 614 seq.), we may also remember his judgement on Sordello's 'sweet and solitary year/Wasted' (Sordello, 111, 58-9) and, perhaps, modify to ourselves the word 'wasted'. The year may well be wasted in one sense, but in another we see its potential for richness when we see the narrator in solitary thought. This incident also contrasts with the narrator's experience, and equally may stress the waste of a year in comparison with the narrator's fertile thoughts. In any case, the way the narrator's authority as seen in his initial invocation of the scene enables us to put trust in his tale.

Sordello's quest is very different from those of Pauline's lover and Paracelsus. Both these protagonists see themselves from the start of their stories as specially selected in some way. Sordello is seen by the narrator as having special gifts, flourishing spontaneously in his ability to receive from nature:

You recognise at once the finer dress
Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness
At eye and ear

(Sordello, 1, 477-9)

Sordello himself, however, does not at this stage put this awareness into a desire to communicate. He is innately susceptible to beauty but not in a way that enables him to proceed to a moral good as Coleridge did:

Oh lady we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live³⁶

Sordello by contrast cannot distinguish true living beauty from objects which cannot feel with him. Columbus and Kemper have pointed out the significance of the scornful narrative comment, 'As if the poppy felt with him!' (Sordello,1,70) following the description of Sordello's early life, apparently in tune with nature but in fact living 'alone' amid wild-wood 'sights' (Sordello,1,704). As Columbus and Kemper show, 'a mystic correlation with trees has limited validity and no practical application whatever'.³⁷ The Speaker knows 'that mystic empathy provides a man only with a highly unstable, limited, and transient method of communication. Neither Sordello nor the Speaker can exist as trees'.³⁸ This is despite the fact that it is at this phase of his life that we see Sordello growing most in his appreciation of beauty and generosity. His flesh, at this time 'amply lets in loveliness' (Sordello,1,478) and although in fantasy, he experiences joy and adventure:

As the adventurous spider, making light
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,
From barbican to battlement: so flung
Fantasies forth and in their centre swung
Our architect, - the breezy morning fresh
Above, and merry, - all his waving mesh
Laughing with lucid dew-drops rainbow-edged

(Sordello,1,665-671)

The world's judgement which lays 'such a spangled fabric low' (Sordello,1,673) is described as 'that dull expedient' (Sordello,1,678) used to steady us when diverted from 'our natural course/Of joys' (Sordello,1,680-1). Sordello may have been living a fantasy, but it has been a fertile one. What happens when he enters 'the world' indicates he may have been better left in his first world of spontaneity.

Sordello's friends have been, like the poppy, transient, and did not share his feelings in any case. Even in the descriptions of his very early life there are hints that all is not as it seems and this becomes increasingly overt. Sordello is, it seems, free to thrive, but the castle at Goito is itself described as being like 'Some captured

creature in a pound' (Sordello, 1, 384). It may be secure and lovely but it is not free although as just seen, Sordello may seem free within it. As we have already seen something of the world into which Sordello has been born - the confusion of Guelf and Ghibelline rivalries - this description of the castle indicates something of the problems to face Sordello. Columbus and Kemper go beyond the idea of Sordello being trapped; to them he is lost in his young Paradisal Goito, 'the dangerous world won't bear Sordello's ordering'.³⁹ The poem gives us an account of the country's turmoil on Sordello's mind, as he seeks a role for himself in the real world and attempts a route through it by song. The language of the poem demonstrates how, in moments of insight, Sordello's language becomes lyrical and can succeed in expressing what he perceives, for instance when he wins the singing contest (with which I will deal in more detail later), whereas the passages of contorted syntax indicate his complex emotions in the confusion of his times, seen most obviously perhaps in his interview with Salinguerra.

Sordello has generalised impulses but no real aim initially. As Whyte points out, his solitary upbringing is hardly conducive to developing such an aim: 'The problem which the life and character of Sordello brings before us is, what would be the result of putting into the world a being gifted with the highest potentialities, but deprived of all the usual channels of self-development and denied those normal forces which guide, direct, and stimulate the human mind in its most plastic and receptive stage?'⁴⁰ So, he goes on, Browning created Sordello 'a poet and a genius with the highest natural gifts of mind, but deprived of all the essentials of normal development. He is ignorant, motherless, lonely, physically weak, and in an obscure position. He struggles up to manhood without knowledge of the world or its ways, selfish and self-centred, without a moral sense, yet with an intense natural feeling for beauty in all its forms and a natural disposition at once lovable and loving'.⁴¹ It could be that Browning is testing Keats here, providing an alternative to Keats':

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness'

(Endymion, 1, 1-3)

or Shelley's idea that a poet may sing to himself in solitude. Browning is tending instead towards a more 'Victorian' ethic, that truly beautiful action is of use too.

If he had been able to channel his energies to some great intention, the world would have been the better because of it. He had no 'single path'⁴² as Earl Hilton says, and what follows from that is frustration and the dissipation of his energies, very much as in Pauline, where the mind with 'nursed up energies' will 'dissipate itself' (Pauline, 291). In contrast, Hilton says Salinguerra should be honoured above Sordello even though he illustrates 'the weakness of strength acting without knowledge'.⁴³ Sordello, given a chance to act - with Salinguerra - passed it up. (Why he did so has been discussed by various critics, and I intend to say more on this later) His chroniclers recorded wonderful things of him:

As Knight, Bard, Gallant, men were never dumb
In praise of him

(Sordello, VI, 827-8)

but his inability to act at the right moment causes us suffering today:

what he should have been,
Could be and was not - the one step too mean
For him to take, - we suffer at this day
Because of

(Sordello, VI, 829-832)

Sordello did not take the chance he 'could' have, so when Dante arrived and 'for the world's sake' (Sordello, VI, 834) would take the step Sordello spurned, he was not able to do so as fully as he might because of political action by Ecelin which, it is implied, Sordello could have prevented. Earl Hilton in fact sees Browning's aim in the whole poem

as 'a study of the human will and the factors which stimulate or block it'.⁴⁴ He describes Sordello as a kind of nineteenth century Hamlet, whose sensitivity and perceptiveness block him from action, and points out the chief emphasis in Sordello is on accepting the world and acting within its limits and imperfections. Sordello learns this truth too late - the tasks of which he was capable were too mean to fit the grandeur of his dreams; his conclusion that his dream was beyond fulfilment thus freed him of the responsibility of trying to achieve it. The social purpose of the poem then could be described as the freeing of the will of man from impediments that block it from the purposeful action that means progress.⁴⁵

In the poem we see Sordello at moments of inspiration totally free in thought, speaking out his truths with full conviction - and effect. In the time when he was able to do so most freely however, there is no sense of his poetry being in the least morally directed; he is able to be fully 'inspired' on impulse, but unable to produce the same level of imaginative involvement for the sake of a moral end, unlike with Wordsworth in The Prelude where imaginative and moral vision are inseparable. Indeed, Sordello's first success is the result of a fantasy which becomes truth; he is in the situation Keats describes as 'Imagination' in his letter to Bailey, 'The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream - he awoke and found it truth'.⁴⁶ Sordello has grown up fit 'to receive/Delight at every sense' (Sordello, 1, 465-6), has dreamed of an encounter as he wanders through a scene to which, it is implied, he is very alive, since the description of it is vibrant:

Then wide
Opened the great morass, shot every side
With flashing water through and through; a-shine
Thick-steaming, all-alive'

(Sordello, 11, 21-4)

Sordello's attitude towards it is questioning and involved:

Whose shape divine,
Quivered i' the farthest rainbow-vapour, glanced
Athwart the flying herons?

It is also the involvement of an amoral child; he may observe the 'diamond jet' (Sordello,11,28) bursting from the marsh-floor but he is equally prepared to 'molest' the 'leeches quick' (Sordello,11,29).⁴⁷ Amoral or not, Sordello is suffused with nature and dreaming of Palma when he arrives at Mantua, and we may imagine his jaw dropping in amazement - 'How he stood!' (Sordello,11,41) The comment on these lines in the Oxford Edition

Steal

Aside and die, Sordello; this is real,
And this - abjure!

(Sordello,11,52-4)

that the narrator knows Sordello ill-equipped to deal with reality (p.248) - is helpful. But at this point he is equipped to deal with imagination. Once Eglamor starts singing, Sordello feels instant recognition, and is only annoyed Eglamor does not take his song far enough:

Sordello's brain

Swam; for he knew a sometime deed again;
So, could supply each foolish gap and chasm
The minstrel left in his enthusiasm

(Sordello,11,70-73)

Sordello can hardly wait for Eglamor to finish before he is there

had begun...

...the true lay with the true end

(Sordello,11,80-82)

There is an enormous difference in the approach of the two poets here; Eglamor is self-conscious before starting, he had to bite

his lip to keep down a great smile
Of pride

(Sordello,11,69-70)

whereas Sordello cannot wait for any formal consideration. Having ignored 'twitchings' (Sordello,11,80) from the trouvère, he achieves what Carlyle calls a musical thought,

that is, one 'spoken by a mind that has penetrated into the inmost heart of the thing; detected the inmost mystery of it, namely the melody that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul, whereby it exists, and has a right to be, here in this world'.⁴⁸ When Sordello sings after Eglamor, his words spring straight from whole vision:

On flew the song, a giddy race,
After the flying story; word made leap
Out word, rhyme - rhyme; the lay could barely keep
Pace with the action visibly rushing past

(Sordello, 11, 84-7)

The effect on those around him is sensational; Naddo falls back 'aghast' (Sordello, 11, 88) and the crowd presses round.

Sordello himself goes through an experience similar to those of Wordsworth's 'spots of time', for instance in the skating episode:

And all the shadowy banks on either side
Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still
The rapid line of motion, then at once
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,
Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs
Wheeled by me - even as if the earth had rolled
With visible motion her diurnal round!
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep

(The Prelude, 1, 480-89)

It is an experience of the effect of vision to be found numerous times in Browning, of a moment outside time which results from vision, whether of love or creation or both. As in Wordsworth, sleep or abstracting oneself from the moment seems associated with this, for instance in By the fire-side, the protagonist's heart was

Wanting to sleep now over its best

(By the fire-side, 202)

By the time of T.S.Eliot, the association with moving out of the experience at such a moment has become something perhaps even more ambiguous:

I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence
(The Waste Land, 38-41)

Sordello's experience is, in a way similar to both that of Wordsworth and the hyacinth girl, of withdrawal:

He seemed to shrink
Into a sleepy cloud

(Sordello, 11, 95-6)

The human, ecstatic contact implied as Palma gives him her scarf is the only humanizing contact, and indeed is totally sensual. He is aware of her rich red lips (Sordello, 11, 98), her pure fleecy hair, and the weft of it that touches his cheek - the 'quite touched' here adds its emphasis. The words they speak are immaterial except that he is aware she speaks, and he replies 'something, anything' (Sordello, 11, 102). He is, as previously in the best of his Goito-life, totally enwrapped in sensation, and his awareness of being wrapped in her scarf, the extreme sensuality of 'her neck's warmth and all' (Sordello, 11, 105) emphasizes this. But, he is inarticulate. Although this is psychologically realistic, typical of intimate meetings or moments of emotion (as in the Wordsworth and Eliot quotes too), in Sordello's case it is what will happen to him again to his loss, for example at his first meeting with Salinguerra. For the description of this meeting though, it increases the sense of the physicality of the moment; Sordello is so absorbed he cannot hear what Palma is saying. The effect of this is so strong that he becomes abstracted from the moment of climax. The sexual parallel is apparent here; following the bliss of having her scarf, warm from her, about his neck:

Again
Moved the arrested magic; in his brain

Noises grew, and a light that turned to glare,
And greater glare, until the intense flare
Engulfed him, shut the whole scene from his sense

(Sordello, 11, 105-9)

As well as a sense of post-climactic dissociation in the line: 'And when he woke 't was many a furlong thence' (Sordello, 11, 110), there is a sense of loss after a quasi-magical experience like that of La belle dame sans merci:

And I awoke and found me here
On the cold hill's side

(La belle dame sans merci, X1, 43-4)

This emphasizes our feeling that he has experienced something total in terms of communication.

When, however, Sordello has motivation of a different kind to communicate, ^{his} demands made on him by the Mantuans, he is hesitant in the extreme; his lack of technique interposes and he has initially to rely on rhymes based on Eglamor's when called upon to sing. He discovers

't was the song's effect
He cared for, scarce the song itself

(Sordello, 11, 485-6)

As Stevenson says, while his triumph may gratify Sordello's love of admiration, 'his creative spirit rebels against the mere reiterating of conventional lyrics'.⁴⁹ In the past, apart from his spontaneous victory over Eglamor, his song has only been used to:

delight his Delians, whose profuse
Praise, not the toilsome process which procured
That praise, enticed Apollo

(Sordello, 11, 488-90)

In any case, his Delians had been figments of his imagination, not made up of a varied group of real people.

Having become more successful in troubadour techniques, Sordello has another problem. His songs are praised to the

heights before he has worked out a way to cope with such praises:

ere he had arranged
Ethereal ways to take them, sorted, changed,
Digested

(Sordello, 11, 543-5)

Because of this he starts to hanker

After the obvious petty joys that spring
From true life

(Sordello, 11, 548-9)

He is, however, wise enough already to resist such lures:

He laughed: what sage
But perishes if from his magic page
He look because, at the first line, a proof
'T was heard salutes him from the cavern roof?

(Sordello, 11, 555-8)

And indeed he is quick to continue his progression into poetry. The problem is, that he advances too rapidly in his perceptions for their proper expression:

perceptions whole, like that he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
As language

(Sordello, 11, 589-61)

When he produces work that pleases the Mantuans, he becomes frustrated as they are so admiring of the characters he conveys to them that they ignore him and his intentions; indeed compare him unfavourably with the heroes he brings them; he is a 'mere singer, ugly, stunted, weak' (Sordello, 11, 629) and the crowd marvels that he is able to portray, for instance, Montfort.

Faced with this, Sordello disintegrates psychologically, 'The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man' (Sordello, 11, 659). Stevenson, in describing his progress, points out that when problems of technique occur, Sordello succumbs to easy popularity which leads him to schizophrenic behaviour

with the bitter discovery that the poet can never be a hero in the eyes of the insensate public.⁵⁰ Sordello now starts to use 'ready-made opinion,.../This quip, that maxim,.../at any folly caught' (Sordello,11,749-51) and the response to song of this kind is unenthusiastic, '-Meantime awards to meantime acts' (Sordello,11,755). As his 'soul' is not able to compass 'whole' experience, he 'Saw, in a tenth part, less and less to strive/About' (Sordello,11,757-8). He is falling into the inertia, or idleness, that will take him back to Goito in a listless state. Columbus and Kemper sum up Sordello's mistakes after beating Eglamor: 'He thinks. He evaluates the position that he holds in the world; he judges himself and his function as poet and king'.⁵¹ By the time Sordello is asked to sing in greeting for Taurello, he cannot produce anything. Time presses and

Out of that aching brain, a very stone,
Song must be struck

(Sordello,11,937-8)

He has a 'block' to creation and he leaves for Goito.

As he finds his statues again it feels as if he finds peace and also the strength to throw away his tokens as poet:

His forehead pressed the moonlit shelf
Beside the youngest marble maid awhile;
Then, raising it, he thought, with a long smile
"I shall be king again!" as he withdrew
The envied scarf; into the font he threw
His crown.

(Sordello,11,998-1003)

The contrast between what happens to Sordello and what Naddo describes to Taurello is marked - Sordello has not simply indulged in 'peevishness, caprice?...spite' (Sordello,11,1010) and in any case Naddo only uses these words as glib excuses. Even more marked perhaps is the contrast between Sordello's temperament and Taurello's; Sordello has been agonizing over his inability to compose;

Taurello is as content with a bull-bait as with a song anyway.

Sordello now feels he is finished as he cannot use his will as he had thought he could except in isolated cases. As a result of this, he wastes a year. He rests, but because he is conscious that is what he is doing he is not properly resting but in distress; Browning gives a vivid description of some kind of breakdown:

Some distress
Was caused, too, by a sort of consciousness
Under the imbecility,- nought kept
That down; he slept, but was aware he slept,
So, frustrated: as who brainsick made pact
Erst with the overhanging cataract
To deafen him, yet still distinguished plain
His own blood's measured clicking at his brain.

(Sordello, 111, 61-8)

This passage is reminiscent of Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey' when he remembers the 'sounding cataract' (77) which 'haunted' him in contrast to his older self who hears in nature 'The still, sad music of humanity' (91). However, while Wordsworth has lost the 'dizzy raptures' (85) of youth, he has replaced them with wisdom and ability to recognise in nature 'The anchor of [his] purest thoughts' (109). Sordello instead is experiencing breakdown on his return to childhood's visions. I will be looking in more detail at this passage in the next chapter. His situation does in fact contrast markedly with the lively mind-travels of the narrator at the end of this book. Sordello receives only, gives out nothing; originally he had the potential to give. This is mainly why his year is wasted; in early Romantic verse, the poet must give something of himself in order to receive any blessing, and, as in the blessing of the water-snakes in 'The Ancient Mariner', such a blessing can be given even to those in deepest despair.

In contrast, when he is later brought back to Mantua, and back with Palma, he does receive since he is also

giving to her - they exchange 'quick low laughs'
(Sordello, 111, 277). As a result of his exchange with Palma,
Sordello goes through a change of mind with regard to
his position in society. He realises now that his wish
for power could also involve some good to the people; he
could not

leave

Wonder how, in the eagerness to rule,
Impress his will on mankind, he (the fool!)
Had never even entertained the thought
That this last arrangement might be fraught
With incidental good to them as well

(Sordello, 1V, 274-9)

Rivers states that Sordello shows that in working for his
own perfection, the individual is at the same time working
for that of collective man.⁵² There would also be reciprocal
pleasures: 'mankind's delight would help to swell/His own'
(Sordello, 1V, 280-81).

These thoughts in mind, he goes to 'confront Taurello'
(Sordello, 1V, 330) - and the effect on Sordello is devastating,
nor does he effect good to mankind through this. He has
been deeply shocked during the encounter:

Scarce an hour had past
When forth Sordello came, older by years
Than at his entry. Unexampled fears
Oppressed him, and he staggered off, blind, mute
And deaf, like some fresh-mutilated brute,
Into Ferrara -

(Sordello, 1V, 331-6)

As Yetman says (referring to Book V) when Sordello goes
to Salinguerra, the former accepts 'with obvious self-
irony and self-condemnation'⁵³ Salinguerra's truth concerning
all human enterprise and the poet in particular. It seems
this comment is relevant to lines like these (Sordello is
speaking):

" My deep of life, I know
" Is unavailing e'en to poorly show'...

(For here the Chief immeasurably yawned)

(Sordello, V, 557-9)

Sordello has realised that his perceptions cannot even be poorly expressed and sees that they may well be irrelevant to Salinguerra. As Yetman says, he is in his self-esteem the antithesis of the Shellyan hero-narrator of Pauline⁵⁴ - or indeed how he himself was in Goito and early Mantuan days.

From Taurello's point of view, Sordello is utterly contrasted with him. He muses on

-that minstrel's thirty years just spent
In doing nought, their notablest event
This morning's journey hither, as I told -
Who yet was lean, outworn and really old,
A stammering awkward man that scarce dared raise
His eye before the magisterial gaze -

(Sordello, 1V, 418-23)

Salinguerra, compared with Sordello, could be thought of as 'a youth' (Sordello, 1V, 427) as he 'nonchalantly looked away'; 'agile, quick/And graceful' (Sordello, 1V, 429-30) are the words associated with him. Despite his youthfulness, Salinguerra does not have the intensity of Sordello. He looks away 'nonchalantly' and, although his eyes are 'vivid' (Sordello, 1V, 443), he is actually

indifferent

Whether on trees or men his thoughts were bent

(Sordello, 1V, 448-9)

In thinking of

his fears and hopes

Of sixty years, his Emperors and Popes,

Cares and contrivances

(Sordello, 1V, 424-6)

Salinguerra 'smiled' (Sordello, 1V, 459). His life has been active, often fast and dangerous, but in contemplating it now, he can smile calmly and appear unmarked by it whereas Sordello, only thirty, is 'lean, outworn and

really old' (Sordello, 1V, 421). Although he is a poet, he cannot express himself; he is a 'stammering awkward man' (Sordello, 1V, 422). Carlyle stresses, the poet must be more than just a poet if he is to be worth anything; 'The grand fundamental character is of the Great Man; that the man be great'.⁵⁵ This quote is relevant when thinking of the difference between Sordello and Salinguerra. It becomes even more telling when considering how their experience has affected their looks and mannerisms; the narrator asks

Why

Detail you thus a varied mastery
But to show how Taurello, on the watch
For men, to read their hearts and thereby catch
Their capabilities and purposes,
Displayed himself so far as displayed these:
While our Sordello only cared to know
About men as a means whereby he'd show
Himself

(Sordello, 1V, 614-622)

This is despite the fact that Sordello wishes people could communicate like brothers, in

// speech where an accent's change gives each
The other's soul //

(Sordello, V, 636-7)

Sordello cannot develop this kind of communication with Salinguerra his natural father, even though the latter is prepared to give him power and the opportunity to work together. He can in the end partially explain his ideals to Salinguerra, but never fulfil the expectations Salinguerra would develop for him. At his last moment, Sordello has the strength to fling down the badge of office Salinguerra has offered him. Yetman sees this as a highly moral decision; approaching death, he says, Sordello chooses the proper attitude to 'reject the baldric, the symbol of illegitimate political power, together with Palma's hand in marriage'⁵⁶ with which Salinguerra tempts him. In terms of Sordello's progress, I agree Sordello has been tempted, but Yetman seems to put more responsibility

onto Salinguerra for tempting him, and this seems out of keeping with Salinguerra's spontaneous throwing of the badge across Sordello's neck (Sordello, V, 719).⁵⁷

Whyte sums up the reasons for Sordello ending as he does like this; his want of education and of balance led to his failure, since he 'was spiritually and aesthetically over-developed'⁵⁸ and his knowledge of the thingness of things struck him dumb. This kind of soul must react against political activity 'and all the mean details of the "vulgar, vast, unobvious work" that was inevitable to the social reformer'. The only thing that could give Sordello the strength to face this knowledge 'was the discovery of a higher Synthesis than his mind had yet perceived, so pure and lofty as to sanctify the meanness of life and hallow the drudgery inevitably entailed'.⁵⁹

Whyte points to the lines: 'Of a power above you still... - What utter need!' (Sordello, VI, 590-603) and states that only in Christian service would Sordello have found his 'moon'. Yetman has more to say on this: 'Sordello's continuing problem as the poem moves to a close is that, though he is increasingly moved to see the wisdom of such a philosophy [the figure of the heavenly body as a source of influence for the terrestrial] the peculiarities of his inflexible nature along with his inability to join his vision to an outside orb combine to frustrate any attempt at such conjunction'.⁶⁰ In the end, as Yetman continues, there is a repeat of the motif in Paracelsus (and indeed, in Pauline too) - of the hero ironically seeing the truth when it is too late for it to affect much.⁶¹ Yetman states that, if he had lived, Sordello would not have acted anyway. Though seeing with increasing clarity what the results of action may be, Sordello is unable to accept these and so 'is predestined to fail at life'.⁶² I think Yetman defines part of Sordello's tragedy by saying, 'Sordello's tragedy stems from our realisation that - even given more time - he would never have become a poet of humanity'.⁶³ His failure is different from Paracelsus' in that Paracelsus had too high and narrow an aim; Sordello's breadth of aspiration is what fails him, inexpressible

in the world's constraints, he could not make himself take the one step 'too mean'. The 'leprosy' seen early by the narrator is of a kind of perfectionism. In addition to this, he has overwhelming problems as a poet, in terms of how to express himself, if indeed that would ever be possible.

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Browning wrote Sordello at a time of increasing interest in defining the nature of poetry, what constituted a poet and the poet's relationship with the audience. Significantly, in 1840, the year of Sordello, Carlyle delivered his lectures on Heroes and Hero-worship which were attended with enthusiasm. The writing of the Romantic poets was influential; Browning himself had been extremely excited by the copy of Shelley's Miscellaneous Poems, given to him in 1826.⁶⁴ Keats' letter to Woodhouse of 1818 could almost be regarded as a starting-point for Browning's distinctions between different kinds of poet in Sordello. Keats makes a distinction between the 'egotistical sublime' and the 'chameleon' poet. He calls the egotistical sublime the Wordsworthian kind, 'which is a thing per se and stands alone'. Keats believes himself to be, if he is 'anything' of the chameleon kind of poet: 'it is not itself - it has no self- it is everything and nothing. It has no character - it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving a Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon poet...A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity - he is continually in for, and filling, some other body... When I am in a room with people if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated...' ⁶⁵ Keats' definition here is helpful for looking at the different kinds of poetic process described in Sordello but Browning goes beyond such distinctions. In Sordello he attempts to show what happens to a poet who appears to belong to a type of poet - as

defined by Keats - in real life, when beset by his own doubts and the pressures from his audience. Sordello himself is seen as incorporating in his poetical nature more than one type of poet. The situation of the poet is subject to change, as seen in Sordello's process. It will be affected by things in his own life as well as through contact with those around him. As Ryals says, a troubadour, 'a poet in constant contact with his audience and other poets', is an ideal choice of subject 'for the working out of that very modern problem - the relationship between the artist and his audience'.⁶⁶ In considering the question of what makes a poet, Browning deals overtly with the differences between Eglamor and Sordello and also with Sordello's development in poetry and in his relationship as poet with his audience.

Eglamor is described as 'Sordello's opposite' (Sordello,11,195). For him 'verse' is 'a temple-worship vague and vast' (Sordello,11,197) similar to Keats' concept in 'The Fall of Hyperion' of the 'eternal domèd monument' (71). The idea of this kind of poet being able to loose 'some sound or sight...his own for ever,...ready to ease/All pain, remove all trouble' (Sordello,11,204-9) is again reminiscent of 'The Fall of Hyperion', when Moneta defines

The poet and the dreamer [as] distinct
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
The one pours out a balm upon the world,
The other vexes it.

(The Fall of Hyperion,199)

This strongly suggests that, although verse may be 'vague' and 'vast' for Eglamor he is truly a poet. It could also suggest that Browning is here challenging Keats, when we see how easily Sordello overcomes Eglamor. Sordello recognises Eglamor's poetic status when he puts his crown 'on the bard's breast' (Sordello,11,287) and says: 'It were a crown, now, fit for poet's head' (Sordello,11,288).

In order to create, Eglamor must first give something of

himself - the 'power' has to be 'soothed by many a rite' (Sordello,11,203) before it responds. This derives from much in Wordsworth and Coleridge, the idea that the individual must give something in order to receive, perhaps most famously seen in the blessing of the water-snakes in 'The Ancient Mariner'. Eglamor is less energetic than the Ancient Mariner in his giving - he soothes his muse ritually rather than freely giving of himself. This lack of spontaneity dooms him when he encounters one who thrives on spontaneity. Eglamor may have to give something of himself in order to make poetry, but he is not interested in giving this blessing to others. He is himself described as 'neediest of his tribe' (Sordello,11,222) and I think the brackets round this description indicate that this fact (along with comments on why he might give more to others) provides an explanation why he does not give more. All he has is poetry and it marks him 'a man apart/From men' (Sordello,11,220-21). He does not make poetry with a moral end in view; he is 'one not to care, take counsel for/ Cold hearts, comfortless faces' (Sordello,11,221-2). Other men

e'en content themselves with wealth
And pomp and power, snatching a life by stealth
(Sordello,11,225-6)

Eglamor is like a 'gnome' (Sordello,11,215), can exist only in his own environment, and there he hides his treasure, his poetry

cloistered up
In some rock-chamber with his agate cup,
His topaz rod, his seed pearl, in these few
And their arrangement finds enough to do
For his best art.

(Sordello,11,215-9)

His poetry and its effect is of prime importance to him, but, as previously mentioned, he is self-conscious about it at the contest in a way Sordello is not. Whereas Sordello's song was the culmination of a walk of complete immersion in his surroundings, Eglamor, intent on triumph to come, notices the woods only as a means of turning

attention from the possibility that he is intent on this expectation:

And Eglamor was noblest poet here -
He well knew, 'mid those April woods he cast
Conceits upon in plenty as he passed,
That Naddo might suppose him not to think
Entirely on the coming triumph

(Sordello, 11, 232-6)

He is, however, entirely caught up in poetry; when he loses 'his purpose', he also loses his position in society, 'his rank' and, as a result, his life (Sordello, 11, 241). He is not, however, envious:

Yet envy sank
Within him, as he heard Sordello out

(Sordello, 11, 242-3)

as he recognises one better at the art. E.D.H. Johnson points out how Eglamor foreshadows the pre-Raphaelite ideal of the artist devoted to aesthetic discipline, the line 'Then how he loved that art!' indicating this.⁶⁷ Like Aprile in Paracelsus, his preference for fancy over fact is mitigated by his capacity for love; at his death he acknowledges Sordello his master.

However the narrator makes it clear that Sordello has by no means put the energy into song-making that Eglamor has. Eglamor has, in fact, put his whole self into his poetry:

Note,

In just such songs as Eglamor (say) wrote
With heart and soul and strength, for he believed
Himself achieving all to be achieved
By singer - in such songs you find alone
Completeness, judge the song and singer one

(Sordello, 111, 615-620)

Sordello's song at the contest has been spontaneous outburst.

Browning's sister's note on these lines:

But, for a special pleasure in the act
Of singing - had he ever turned, in fact,
From Elys, to sing Elys? - from each fit
Of rapture to contrive a song of it?

(Sordello, 11, 137-140)

is important: 'Sordello had sung well on a subject about which Eglamor had sung indifferently, but had he ever given his mind to the art of creating a song?'⁶⁸ Not that he needs to at this stage; it has arisen spontaneously in the way Mill describes Art, with Science in The Spirit of the Age: it is 'the free gift of Nature; an unsolicited, unexpected gift, often even a fatal one. These things rise up, as it were, by spontaneous growth, in the free soil and sunshine of Nature'. At this time, Sordello soars 'By means of that mere snatch, to many a hoard/Of fancies' (Sordello, 11, 144-5) but it seems chance that induced the 'snatch' in the first place, and Sordello himself cannot understand why others should find the same pleasure in his song as he does, seeing they do not actually know the subject as he knows it. Perhaps they find

a beauty separate

In the poor snatch itself?

(Sordello, 11, 150-51)

Sordello wonders if he can help the crowd see something they otherwise would not; Sordello thinks,

if they heard

"Just those two rhymes, assented at my word,
"And loved them as I love them who have run
"These fingers through those pale locks, let the sun
"Into the white cool skin - who first could clutch,
"Then praise - I needs must be a god to such.

(Sordello, 11, 155-160)

He sees himself as in the position of poet who can make others see what only one blessed with a 'seeing eye' can, the 'thingness' of things. Carlyle exclaims, 'The seeing eye! It is this that discloses the inner harmony of things;

what Nature meant, what musical idea Nature has wrapped-up in these often rough embodiments. Something else she did mean. To the seeing eye that something were discernible'.⁶⁹ Sordello thinks it possible that people have 'fancies - slow, perchance, / Not at their beck' (Sordello, 11, 165-6) which 'gleam fitfully until a poet brings them into focus, and they see distinctly'⁷⁰:

" which indistinctly glance
Until, by song, each floating part be linked
To each, and all grow palpable, distinct?"

(Sordello, 11, 166-8)

The poet then, thinks Sordello, can lead others to perception. Following his own perceptions prior to his singing, he has been able to pour forth his song and, on his return to Goito, to think. His awareness of this makes him buoyant:

Light

Sordello rose - to think, now; hitherto
He had perceived.

(Sordello, 11, 122-4)

It also makes him hopeful of even more awareness:

Sure, a discovery grew
Out of it all!

(Sordello, 11, 124-5)

However, this is not all positive; as E.D.H. Johnson says,⁷¹ Sordello grows vainglorious following his success and begins to think all he needs to do is to give unbridled expression to his imagination, he quotes Sordello's exuberant, and too proud,

" So, range, free soul! - who, by self-consciousness,
The last drop of all beauty dost express -
The grace of seeing grace, a quintessence
For thee: while for the world, that can dispense
Wonder on men..."

(Sordello, 11, 405-9)

For Sordello, 'thought' is what comes from imaginative return to triumph when he is back in Goito after the contest:

Best live from first to last
The transport o'er again. A week he passed,
Sucking the sweet out of each circumstance

(Sordello, 11, 125-7)

Only later in his thoughts does he start to wonder why the people reacted as they did. In fact, his very creativity has arisen from such a brooding on each discovery - until this brooding becomes so weighty he must remove it by investing what he broods on with its own character. Sordello's 'flesh...amply lets in loveliness/At eye and ear' (Sordello, 1, 478-9) unlike 'the rest' of mankind who have 'furled' round them

A veil that shows the sky not near so blue,
And lets but half the sun look fervid through.

(Sordello, 1, 481-2)

Here we may well be reminded of how, at the poem's opening, we are told:

A single eye
From all Verona cared for the soft sky.

(Sordello, 1, 85-6)

and in hollow people hatred was the only intense emotion:

Fear had long since taken root
In every breast, and now these crushed its fruit,
The ripe hate, like a wine: to note the way
It worked while each grew drunk! Men grave and grey
Stood, with shut eyelids, rocking to and fro,
Letting the silent luxury trickle slow
About the hollows where a heart should be;
But the young gulped with a delirious glee
Some foretaste of their first debauch in blood

(Sordello, 1, 91-9)

Sordello's intensity is in contrast to this kind, but unlike Wordsworth's descriptions in The Prelude, can be

too burdensome. Wordsworth describes how:

A child, I held unconscious intercourse
With the eternal beauty, drinking in
A pure organic pleasure from the lines
Of curling mist, or from the level plain
Of waters coloured by the steady clouds

(The Prelude, 1, 559-63)

The word 'steady' is significant; he has earlier described how Nature purifies:

The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying, by such discipline,
Both pain and fear, until we recognise
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart

(The Prelude, 1, 414-7)

For the child Wordsworth, his drinking in of nature has led to discipline and steadiness; for Sordello, it starts as burdensome - after a brief, very young period - and leads to something unreal:

How can such love? - like souls on each full-fraught
Discovery brooding, blind at first to aught
Beyond its beauty, till exceeding love
Becomes an aching weight; and, to remove
A curse that haunts such natures - to preclude
Their finding out themselves can work no good
To what they love nor make it very blest
By their endeavour, - they are fain invest
The lifeless thing with life from their own soul,
Availing it to purpose, to control,
To dwell distinct and have peculiar joy

(Sordello, 1, 483-493)

So, on the positive side, the intensity leads, at least in the poet's mind, to the giving of life, through and in the imagination, to the beloved object. Sordello is thus already seen as projector as well as absorber. Yetman uses these very words of Sordello, adding that he belongs to the 'assimilative' rather than 'expressive' category of poet, making the point also that these two can co-exist

harmoniously before the character is capable of self-regard or judgement.⁷² This kind of character does not rest at giving one lifeless soul apparent life (he thinks real life) but:

fresh births of beauty wake
Fresh homage, every grade of love is past,
With every mode of loveliness

(Sordello, 1, 496-8)

Casting aside 'Inferior idols' he now recognises his 'crown' as 'borrowed' (Sordello, 1, 499). And so these idols have their crowns cast off 'Before a coming glory' (Sordello, 1, 500). Here the imagery is biblical; as the character learns to cast away false idols, so eventually will he come to a paradisaical state and see God:

Up and down
Runs arrowy fire, while earthly forms combine
To throb the secret forth; a touch divine -
And the scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod;
Visibly through his garden walketh God.

(Sordello, 1, 500-504)

This passage should be read bearing in mind St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he describes how with true knowledge will come vision of God, where he says: 'now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face'⁷³, anticipating a new Eden.

Alba Warren in his chapter on Browning defines succinctly what this kind of poet is, one who invests nature with the motion of his own mind and eventually comes to find God in a beautiful combination of earthly forms.⁷⁴ This kind of poet has been termed 'objective'. In Browning it is contemporary with Carlyle: 'The true poet is ever...the seer; whose eye has been gifted to discern the godlike mystery of God's Universe; we can still call him a Vatis or seer'.⁷⁵ This kind of poet, however, does not necessarily use his insight in a profitable way. The narrator indeed says that the ultimate effect is the negating of the poet.

These poets need:

to blend with each external charm,
Bury themselves, the whole heart wide and warm, -
In something not themselves; they would belong
To what they worship - stronger and more strong
Thus prodigally fed -

(Sordello, 1, 507-511)

This leads to something sinister; the objects the poet worships do not necessarily lead to God; any object he worships:

gathers shape
And feature [to his, the poet's mind], soon
imprisons past escape
The votary framed to love and to submit
Nor ask, as passionate he kneels to it,
Whence grew the idol's empery.

(Sordello, 1, 511-15)

The poet's situation means giving so much that he dissipates himself completely; there is nothing of himself left when he has added his energy to the creation of other objects, previously incomplete:

So runs
A legend; light had birth ere moons and suns,
Flowing through space a river and alone,
Till chaos burst and blank the spheres were strown
Hither and thither, foundering and blind:
When into each of them rushed light - to find
Itself no place, foiled of its radiant chance.

(Sordello, 1, 515-521)

Browning has taken the idea of the 'chameleon' poet and explored its implications in a troubled world, showing what could happen if this idea were taken to one absurd - but logical - conclusion. The Oxford edition's note on the next line: 'Let such forego their just inheritance!'

is helpful: 'Let such forego: as light, according to the legend, illuminates the universe yet has no proper home, so such loving natures are destined to find no resting-place' (p.220). However the comment does not indicate the tone implied by the exclamation-mark, which seems ambiguous. Is the narrator merely dismissing such poets carelessly, or does the exclamation-mark refer to the shock that such generous souls have to be allowed to forego what is justly theirs?

This account of what is likely to happen to a poet whose nature becomes involved with others' is rather different from Keats' account of the chameleon poet, whom he sees as becoming absorbed into all others in his vicinity, but not to the extent that he merges with objects to which he himself first gave life, or believed he gave life. Coleridge's account of this kind of poet is even more enthusiastic than Keats'. He uses Shakespeare as the example of what he calls the Protean genius, describing how he'darts himself forth, and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the one Proteus of the fire and the flood'.⁷⁶ Browning could then be seen to have taken an earlier theory of the poet, one favouring the 'chameleon' kind, and to have worked out what could actually happen in an extreme case with such a character.

The narrator then proceeds to outline another kind of poet, just as eager to look on beauty, but unlike the 'gentler crew' (Sordello,1,524) referring outward signs of beauty inward. This kind:

Proclaims each new revelation born a twin
With a distinctest consciousness within,
Referring still the quality, now first
Revealed, to their own soul - its instinct nursed
In silence, now remembered better, shown
More thoroughly, but not the less their own

(Sordello,1,525-30)

As Lee Erickson says, 'The self-conscious soul discovers

poetry within itself and not in the world and so it directs its homage not toward the world but toward itself: "So, homage, other souls direct/Without turns inward"....But even as this soul pays homage to itself, it also seeks the approval of others to feed its pride in itself...'⁷⁷

Ryals seems nearer than Erickson to what this passage is about, putting well Sordello's overall problem as poet: 'This "subjective" type cannot be fully embodied in art, always having something left over and giving the audience "proof" that "the singer's proper life" exists underneath his song, that the song itself is but an episode in the poet's life (3.622-30). For such a poet formal closure - "completeness" - is out of the question, because more is suggested than can ever be produced. For such a poet there is always an imbalance between himself and his forms'.⁷⁸ In this kind of poet, rather than considering outward forms or shadows of truth to come, the outward forms are like mirrors of the inward and simply 'born a twin' (Sordello,1,525) to those. Anything outward, 'The being fair, or good, or wise, or strong' has been 'Dormant within their nature all along' (Sordello,1,533-4). However, although they may have extraordinary gifts, such do not consider it their fault if they do not actually express them in the world. They soothe themselves easily:

Whose fault? So, homage, other souls direct
Without, turns inward. "How should this deject
"Thee, soul?" they murmur; "wherefore strength be
quelled
"Because, its trivial accidents withheld,
"Organs are missed that clog the world, inert,
"Wanting a will, to quicken and exert,
"Like thine - existence cannot satiate,
"Cannot surprise? Laugh thou at envious fate,
"Who, from earth's simplest combination stamp
"With individuality - uncramp
"By living its faint elemental life,
"Dost soar to heaven's complexest essence, rife
"With grandeurs, unaffronted to the last,
"Equal to being all! ---^w

Duff's paraphrase here is extremely helpful: 'Whose fault is it if the conception is never wrought out by themselves - if they do not find their own expression for it? There is no fault at all: far from blaming themselves, they do themselves homage. "How should the failure to act out such conceptions deject thee, my soul?" they murmur. "Why should the power of thine inward life be quenched simply because, fit opportunities for the proper revelation of these conceptions being withheld, thou lackest the means of outward expression that belong to common men, who, indeed, are cumbered by their means of expression, which are too great for anything there is in them to express, - who have not a mind like thine, which existence itself, with all its wealth, cannot satisfy and cannot surprise, since thou hast already dreamed the fairest it can show? Laugh thou at envious fate, which denies thee sufficient temporal powers to reveal thy soul - thou who dost boldly soar from the conception of the nature of the lowest form of individual life, too slenderly endowed to feel its earthly limitations, to the conception of heaven's completest essence, and art able to realise in thine imagination all existences in the universe, however grand they be "'⁷⁹

Again it is possible that the idea for this kind of poet derives from Coleridge. I have already quoted the passage on the Shakespearean kind, the 'protean' poet, and, in the same section, Coleridge speaks of Milton as an opposite kind, as one who attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal: 'All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of Milton...'⁸⁰ Again, Browning extends such ideas in Sordello. In his description, this kind of character can go in one of two directions. One may request him to 'challenge life for us' (Sordello, 1, 549) in which case there would be hope for the whole race - even the 'meanest' with 'more bounded wills' (Sordello, 1, 552-3) would be able to follow. However, this kind of mind may be enervated by a 'certain mood', in which it rests on its laurels, 'slumber[s] in the solitude/ Thus reached...' (Sordello, 1, 554-5), not exerting itself

for the good of others. This would happen if the world were too narrow a sphere for the poet to feel rewarded by any such action. We see later how Sordello did not take action he should have since it was

the one step too mean
For him to take

(Sordello, VI, 830-31)

The alternative for such a poet, however, is that

a desire possess it to put all
That nature forth, forcing our straitened sphere
Contain it

(Sordello, I, 562-4)

It seems the 'normal' world is too limited to contain the full nature of one like Sordello. If he were able to be in actuality what he is in his thoughts, his effect on the world would be too great, too much for others to accept; 'eternity's concern' (Sordello, I, 566) may only enter time violently, through being thrust, if it is introduced prematurely. Here the narrator hints strongly that this is part of Sordello's mistake, with his cut-off: 'So that Sordello...' (Sordello, I, 567).

As the poem continues, I think we see Sordello going from one alternative to the other. He will not take the step 'too mean' (Sordello, VI, 830), but just previous to our being told this, he has tried to tell all of his instinctive feelings to help mankind - and the world at his time is indeed too narrow for any help he could offer. Indeed, language itself has been seen as too narrow:

perceptions whole, like those he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
As language

(Sordello, II, 589-91)

So, it looks as if Sordello is thought of initially as an

'objective' poet, but, as he matures, as a 'subjective' type, referring externals to what is going on in his soul. When he wins the contest however, something different and far more generous is going on, as his song arises from absorption in his subject.

Such a poet can fail, and Sordello fails as any such poet would. However, his position in terms of himself as poet is not his only reason for failing. For his poetry will not mature while he is lacking in his life as a whole. As Rivers puts it, Sordello fails due to the conflict of his spiritual and physical nature; ideally the individual should be poised between the two.⁸¹ And, thinking of Carlyle, the man must be great before the poet can be. Although Sordello is seen initially as

foremost in the regal class
Nature has broadly severed from her mass
(Sordello, 1, 467-8)

what he is apart for is his ability to take in pleasure. All might have been well with him had he been in a different world; he is 'framed for pleasure' in the way Nature has framed 'some happy lands that have luxurious names, / For loose fertility' (Sordello, 1, 469-71). This by no means implies the strength to cope with the world into which he has been born. Sordello may have

the finer dress
Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness
At eye and ear
(Sordello, 1, 476-8)

but this capacity is passive and, again, gives us no reason to expect he will do anything with his life in any way beneficial to others. Yetman sums up well how the poet and the man in Sordello are not complementary. He explains how two distinct and tragically antithetical forces are at work: 'On the one hand, a continuously broadening consciousness and sophistication with respect to the nature, complexity,

and limitations of human experience, and, on the other, an imaginative faculty steadfastly and stubbornly resistant to the adjustments and compromises that the world would inevitably exact from such a soul'.⁸²

This resistance turns out to be Sordello's failing; he may have vision but his unwillingness, or inability, to use it is certain to lead to his failure. Carlyle says that the poet cannot prevent himself always seeing. In itself, this is not enough; as Yetman puts it, for Browning the idea of poetry that went nowhere beyond a sterile communication with the self was morally irresponsible. Mill was decisive on this point; in Spirit of the Age he writes, 'Our grand business undoubtedly is, not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand'.⁸³ The action to be taken is not necessarily made clear, but it could be something as seemingly simple as imparting insight to us, as in Coleridge's thoughts on true imagination, which allows the 'ordinary' person to reach the stage of perceiving what the poet expresses, since he expresses it so tellingly. Stempel⁸⁴ quotes aptly from Sordello on what the poet's duty should involve:

The office of ourselves, - nor blind nor dumb,
And seeing somewhat of man's state, - has been,
For the worst of us, to say they so have seen;
For the better, what it was they saw; the best
Impart the gift of seeing to the rest

(Sordello, 111, 864-8)

When he goes to express his ideas to Salinguerra, however, Sordello can barely express what he means, let alone enable Salinguerra to understand; to him Sordello appears 'a stammering awkward man'. (Sordello, 1V, 422)

As Morse Peckham puts it, the first Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge had to create a new social role for themselves having rejected available social roles. The solution, he says, was to create an 'anti-role' of the self.⁸⁵ This was the result of a sense of alienation or isolation

from the world. In addressing his friend in The Prelude, solitude is considered by Wordsworth as morally commendable:

For thou hast sought
The truth in solitude, and thou art one,
The most intense of Nature's worshippers
(The Prelude, 11, 460-62)

This theme is used again in Wordsworth's solitary characters and perhaps even more so in Coleridge where solitude often leads eventually to something regenerative. In solitary musings, the Romantic could get more in touch with his own feelings and with nature, and then give this 'inspired' knowledge to others. As a being blessed with higher, or deeper, knowledge than others, the Romantic was both alienated from the mass and also in a position to help others. He could help them discover similar intensity in their lives, and the blessing associated with that and the sense of discovering God through imaginative interaction with Nature. However, in Pauline, Browning shows more cynically how such a solitude can lead to self-destructive thoughts: 'A mind like this must dissipate itself' (Pauline, 291). In Sordello too, we see an exploration of how solitude may lead to the discovery of beauty (which need not be substantial just because the poet sees it as lovely), or to the sinking into a wasted year.

For the Romantics, the poet can be expected to write subjectively about immediate, personal experience, which he knows to be out of reach of most people except through the medium of the poet. Sordello cannot provide this ideal since he is so extreme that he cannot subject his real insight to the words comprehended - and wanted - by Naddo. For Sordello, each song is an 'incident' in his life, and his true poetry lies beneath, hidden from the world, inexpressible in words. In 'The Wanderer', Wordsworth expresses simply the germ of this idea:

Oh! Many are the poets that are sown
By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts,

The vision and the faculty divine;
Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse

(The Wanderer, 76-80)

For Wordsworth here, the gap is apparently one of education and so easily corrected; in Sordello, Browning is questioning whether the Sordello-type of poet would ever have the ability to express the kind of insights he has. Such insights may well be inexpressible and Sordello himself will not stoop to approximating his vision in the words that are available. Sordello is in any case not 'a god' to people; even if his sensibilities are those of a poet, his art does not convey this. He does not gain the maturity as a person to improve this; his reaction after his first success is significant - when he finds it is the song's effect he has cared for rather than the song itself. And he is slow to discover that his art will not improve until his understanding of others increases. As Naddo says, his knowledge that he is 'a bard/Must constitute [his] whole, [his] sole reward' (Sordello, 11, 819-820). As Whyte puts it, his greatness is just an assertion that he cannot prove as far as the world is concerned. Sordello should 'challenge life' for us but he 'fails to perform this function if he does not relate his vision of truth to present action'.⁸⁶ Sordello wants to be the source of knowledge and value to men, but as Columbus and Kemper point out, pure Nature cannot structure the universe. Instinct alone will achieve nothing, and, in Columbus and Kemper's account, as we have seen, there is a feeling that Sordello's youth with objects of nature has been too unreal to build on.⁸⁷ When Sordello fails, he loses 'the art of dreaming' and, in this loss has even less chance of imposing his will on mankind. Since at least classical times, power has often been seen as bound up with the ability to express oneself. For instance Orpheus was the natural leader in nature due to his power of song, Tamburlaine remained king while his gifts of expression were used appropriately by him; in her famous speech to inspire others against the Armada, Elizabeth I showed how rhetoric could be more powerful than mere physical force in a leader - though she is not able

to fight personally, her heart is 'of a king'. Sordello may have 'perceptions whole' but he is, also, as Columbus and Kemper put it, 'internally disoriented'⁸⁸ and so for instance, when he tries to convince Salinguerra that the Ghibellines are wrong, he simply cannot express himself. He is caught in a chicken-and-egg situation. When he finds he is not able to appeal to the crowd, he loses the art of dreaming. Having lost this he is incapable of again attempting to appeal to the crowd; he has nothing to say now since the ability to perceive wholly in his private dreaming way is really all he does have.

His dilemma comes too from the fact that much of what he wants to express is ahead of his age; he cannot thrust 'in time eternity's concern' (Sordello, 1, 566). What Carlyle has to say about the poet's situation in the eighteenth century is relevant here. In that time, he writes, the poet had to fail as the age is unable to recognise him unless he diffuses his truth with its scepticism.⁸⁹ For this reason, Sordello finds the transition from his imaginary world at Goito to the real world of real people with their own wills and ideas impossible. As Whyte puts it, he finds it hard to learn real people will not be automatically obedient to his will. He forgets that nobody in his inner world 'had ever yet been conceived with a will in direct opposition to his own'.⁹⁰

The only way Sordello will have influence is after he is dead, as poets or thinkers advance the world's thought little by little; as in Paracelsus, Sordello realises near his end that thought can advance only a tiny step at a time. In the end that is his tragedy; he is out of his own element and has not the strength to influence others to his way of thinking nor the humility or insight to compromise his ideals to theirs.

Had he been able to direct his thoughts some other way it is possible he need not have ended with such a failure. His realisation that he should turn to God for genuine inspiration occurs at the very last minute. The narrator

puts Sordello's thoughts into words:

Ah my Sordello, I this once befriend
And speak for you. Of a Power above you still
Which, utterly incomprehensible,
Is out of rivalry, which thus you can
Love, tho' unloving all conceived by man -
What need!

(Sordello, V1, 590-95)

Sordello sees this divine help in his final moments:

you divine who sat there dead,
Under his foot the badge: still, Palma said,
A triumph lingering in the wide eyes,
Wider than some spent swimmer's if he spies
Help from above in his extreme despair,
And, head far back on shoulder thrust, turns there
With short quick passionate cry

(Sordello, V1, 613-9)

As in Pauline and Paracelsus, Sordello discovers a true help when his end is already settled. Stempel comments illuminatingly at this point:

And of - none the minutest duct
To that out-nature, nought that would instruct
And so let rivalry begin to live -
But of a Power its representative
Who, being for authority the same,
Communication different, should claim
A course, the first chose but this last revealed -
This Human clear, as that Divine concealed -
What utter need!

(Sordello, V1, 595-603)

What Stempel says is that the poet must recognise the Human in the Divine as well as the Divine in the Human. Sordello - and Shelley - had not yet learnt this, 'imprisoned within the romantic ego, they worshipped the

divine spark of the self and ignored the flame that burned above them'. Stempel goes on to say that it is 'only through an out-soul' which guides and directs from above that communication can be established between the lower and higher realms of being.⁹¹

It is true that when Sordello's inspiration is triggered by the energy given him by his aspiring to, and imaginative vision of, Palma, he creates a true song. Unlike in Pauline, Sordello's feeling for Palma is reciprocated; we may believe in communication between them in a way impossible between Pauline and her lover, or between the protagonists in the formal speeches of Paracelsus. Palma has early been deeply drawn to Sordello; she tells Salinguerra how

For Palma, she would blend
"With this magnificent spirit to the end,
"That ruled her first

(Sordello, V, 799-801)

Sordello and Palma are not only spiritually but also physically blended. After her placing of her scarf about him, it comes as little surprise to find them in a snatched intimate night:

I' the palace, each by each,
Sordello sat and Palma: little speech
At first in that dim closet, face with face
(Despite the tumult in the market-place)
Exchanging quick low laughs: now would rush
Word upon word to meet a sudden flush,
A look left off, a shifting lips' surmise -
But for the most part their two histories
Ran best thro' the locked fingers and linked arms.

(Sordello, 111, 273-81)

This is the nearest we see Sordello to

speech where an accent's change gives each
The other's soul

(Sordello, V, 636-7)

He and Palma find peace despite the rushing on of the night 'with its alarms' (Sordello,111,282). Before the news that 'Ferrara's succoured' (Sordello,111,303), Palma and Sordello again sit together, and Palma gains the confidence to tell him how her instincts drew her to him,

telling of another want
Goito's quiet nourished than his own
(Sordello,111,310-11)

While Sordello had dreamed of being in control of nature,

in dream was Palma subjected
To some out-soul, which dawned not though she pined
Delaying, till its advent, heart and mind
Their life.
(Sordello,111,316-9)

She in fact did not dare let the force inside her expand:

till some out-soul, whose resource
It grew for, should direct it
(Sordello,111,320-21)

One point, one part, in the will of the out-soul would be known to her as guide.

She had mused on the kind of person who could be such to her, and how to serve him, much as Sordello had dreamed of Palma. As Sordello is shocked by the suddenness of his stumbling upon the 'real men and women' amidst his dreaming, so is she jolted by her sight of him at the court:

"And chief, that earnest April morn
"Of Richard's Love-court, was it time, so worn
"And white my cheek, so idly my blood beat,
"Sitting that morn beside the Lady's feet
"And saying as she prompted; till outburst
"One face from all the faces.

(Sordello,111,349-54)

Up till then, she has been passive, content to speak as Adelaide wanted. She does not say it here, but in placing her scarf on Sordello, we have seen her speaking for herself. Having found her 'out-soul' by no means makes Palma inarticulate; in her time spent alone with Sordello (Book 111) she is voluble to him, both about her past experience and about the political situation, of which he is ignorant. She finishes by inspiring Sordello to seek Salinguerra. Sordello is her inspiration, and she inspires him also. The difference between them is that, in the end, Sordello will choose his own vision rather than a real-life option even though it includes her hand in marriage. He is so obsessed by his ideal, as Stempel says, that he cannot come to terms with limitations.⁹² He wants to arouse others to act in accordance with his ideals. And when Taurello gives him the badge of office, Sordello finds he cannot act. Realising at last, like Paracelsus, that failure and disillusionment can be avoided only by moving step by step to the ideal (Sordello, V1, 497-503), he however cannot 'brutalize/ The soul' (Sordello, V1, 573-4) by surrendering his vision of 'the Absolute'. As we have seen, something which could be a true vision of what is absolute occurs only at the moment of his strongest decision, which brings his death.

Notes

1. See William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet, p.86
2. Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p.107
3. Thomas Carlyle, Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (Everyman 1908), p.323
4. Herbert F. Tucker, Jr, Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure, p.85
5. Mrs Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, p.34
6. Herbert Tucker, op.cit., p.85
7. Ibid, p.85
8. Mrs Sutherland Orr, op.cit., p.79
9. Ibid, p.79
10. Herbert Tucker, op.cit., p.87
11. The Poetical Works of Robert Browning (Oxford 1984), Vol 2, p.19
12. Ibid, p.192
13. Robert Graves, 'The Cool Web', Collected Poems (London 1975), p.37,1-8
14. Anne Stevenson, in Poetry Review, 74, p.8
15. Clyde de L. Ryals, Becoming Browning. The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning, 1833-1846, pp75-94
16. William Irvine and Park Honan, op.cit., p.86
17. Letter to J. Milsand, of Dijon, June 9th, 1863, see The Poetical Works of Robert Browning, op.cit., p.194
18. Lee Erickson, Robert Browning, His Poetry and His Audiences, p.50
19. Philip Drew, op.cit., p.77
20. A.J. Whyte ed. Browning's Sordello, p.4
21. R.W. Church, Dante and other essays (USA 1969), p.222
22. Whyte, op.cit., p.5

23. Mrs Orr, op.cit., p.28
24. E.D.H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry - Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, pp9-10
25. Robert R. Columbus and Claudette Kemper, 'Sordello and the Speaker: A Problem in Identity', Victorian Poetry, 2, 1964, p.253
26. Ibid, p.256
27. Ibid, p.259
28. William Irvine and Park Honan, op.cit., p.87
29. Lee Erickson, op,cit., pp50-51
30. Herbert Tucker, op.cit., p.85
31. Ibid, p.93
32. Lewis Worthington Smith, 'Browning's Place in the Evolution of English Poetry', The Sewanee Review, p.451
33. Letter to J. Milsand, op.cit., p.194
34. E.H. Thomson, The Tragedy of a troubadour. An Interpretation of Browning's Sordello
35. See Daniel Stempel, 'Browning's Sordello: The Art of the Makers-See', PMLA, LXXX, 1965 , pp554-561
36. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode', 47-8
37. Columbus and Kemper, op.cit., p.256
38. Ibid, p.256
39. Ibid, p.255
40. Whyte, op.cit., p.26
41. Ibid, p.26
42. Earl Hilton, 'Browning's Sordello as a Study of the Will', PMLA, 69, 1954, p.1128
43. Ibid, p.1128
44. Ibid, p.1128
45. Ibid, p.1134
46. Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817 (Letters of John Keats, ed. Gardner, p.65)

47. The Oxford Edition glosses, with S.B.'s authority, 'leeches quick' as 'golden swarm of insects'. This makes it seem even less apt to molest them than if we interpret it as simply 'leeches', which are of course found in marshes. If we assume them to be leeches, they would normally be perceived as molesting people and so Sordello's action would seem a curious reversal rather than quite as vindictive as the 'swarm of insects' interpretation would imply.
48. Thomas Carlyle, *op.cit.*, p.316
49. Lionel Stevenson, 'The Key Poem of the Victorian Age', Essays in American and English Literature, p.281
50. *Ibid*, p.280
51. Columbus and Kemper, *op.cit.*, p.256
52. Charles Leo Rivers, Robert Browning's Theory of the Poet, 1833 to 1841, p.131
53. Michael G. Yetman, 'Exorcising Shelley out of Browning: Sordello and the Problem of Poetic Identity', Victorian Poetry, Vol 13, 2, Summer 1975, p.93
54. *Ibid*, p.93
55. Thomas Carlyle, *op.cit.*, p.312
56. Yetman, *op.cit.*, p.94
57. It is worth contrasting this brief moment with the time when Palma puts her scarf on Sordello. Her token was deserved; this one is not.
58. Whyte, *op.cit.*, p.33
59. *Ibid*, p.33
60. Yetman, *op.cit.*, p.91
61. *Ibid*, p.94
62. *Ibid*, p.94
63. *Ibid*, p.94
64. William Irvine and Park Honan, *op.cit.*, p.15
65. Keats to Woodhouse, 27 October 1818 (Letters of John Keats, ed. Gardner, p.121)

66. Ryals, op.cit., p.86
67. E.D.H. Johnson, op.cit., p.78
68. The Poetical Works of Robert Browning, op.cit., p.252
69. Thomas Carlyle, op.cit., p.337
70. The Poetical Works of Robert Browning, op.cit., p.253
71. E.D.H. Johnson, op.cit., p.78
72. Yetman, op.cit., p.88
73. Authorized Edition of the Bible, 1 Corinthians, 13
74. Alba H. Warren, Jr, English Poetic Theory, 1825 - 1865, p.115
75. Thomas Carlyle, op.cit., p.313
76. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, p.180
77. Lee Erickson, op.cit., p.52.

I cannot agree with his reading in its entirety here; the soul surely does find poetry in the world but simply refers it back to that in itself. Also, Erickson feels that Sordello goes to Mantua in order to seek the approval of others: 'to aggrandize himself, Sordello eventually seeks the plaudits of the crowd'. His first expedition to Mantua seems to me a far less overt journey than that, and his performance there extraordinary. There is no hint during this performance that he is aware of what anyone is thinking; he is so absorbed that he cannot even discern the words Palma says to him while bestowing 'some' prize on him. If his attitude here were as Erickson suggests, he would surely also be aware of the effect he creates after he has sung.

78. Ryals, op.cit., p.92
79. See The Poetical Works of Robert Browning, op.cit., p.221
80. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, p.180
81. Rivers, op.cit., p.110
82. Yetman, op.cit., p.82
83. Mill, The Spirit of the Age, p.98
84. Stempel, op.cit., p.555
85. Morse Peckham, 'Browning and Romanticism', Robert Browning, ed. Isobel Armstrong, pp47-76

86. Whyte, op.cit., p.34
87. Columbus and Kemper, op.cit., especially p.255
88. Ibid, p.260
89. Thomas Carlyle, op.cit., p.398
90. Whyte, op.cit., p.90
91. Stempel, op.cit., p.561
92. Ibid, p.560

A DISCUSSION OF SOME PASSAGES IN SORDELLO

Sordello needs to be read several times, in parts and as a whole, before one can begin to enjoy the more lyrical, and understand the more complex, passages. Individual sections of the poem fall into place in the light of the whole, while the whole cannot be understood without a detailed comprehension of individual lines and passages. With this in mind, I intend in this chapter to investigate some passages of Sordello in terms of meaning and impact. The Oxford Edition now provides a good gloss to many unfamiliar words and much complex phraseology. I intend to explore sections of the poem with a view to a fuller all-round understanding than would be appropriate in such a gloss.

It is often difficult to isolate particular passages in Sordello, since one section usually leads subtly into the next. However, I will select passages mainly for the light they shed on the development of Sordello himself as man and as a poet. Through Sordello's progress, Browning explores the questions of what makes a poet and of what ought to be his function in the world, which, as I have mentioned earlier, were of much interest to Browning's contemporaries. I am writing on the opening section to show the way in which the reader is challenged throughout the poem; the complexity of poetry-making and of the kinds of demand to be made on the reader, are apparent from the start. All the hesitancies, insecurities and power of a poet are presented at first hand to remain strongly in one's mind as one reads of Sordello's progress. Within the confines of this chapter it is not feasible to cover the whole of this progress. The passages were therefore chosen as following reasonably closely from each other so that, for any reader unfamiliar with Sordello, some kind of progression could be retained.

And shaming her; 't is not for fate to choose
Silence or song because she can refuse
Real eyes to glisten more, real hearts to ache
40 Less oft, real brows turn smoother for our sake:
I have experienced something of her spite;
But there's a realm wherein she has no right
And I have many lovers. Say, but few
Friends fate accords me? Here they are: now
view
45 The host I muster! Many a lighted face
Foul with no vestige of the grave's disgrace;
What else should tempt them back to taste our
air
Except to see how their successors fare?
My audience! and they sit, each ghostly man
50 Striving to look as living as he can,
Brother by breathing brother; thou art set,
Clear-witted critic, by... but I'll not fret
A wondrous soul of them, nor move death's
spleen
Who loves not to unlock them. Friends! I mean
55 The living in good earnest - ye elect
Chiefly for love - suppose not I reject
Judicious praise, who contrary shall peep,
Some fit occasion, forth, for fear ye sleep,
To glean your bland approvals. Then, appear,
60 Verona! stay - thou, spirit, come not near
Now - not this time desert thy cloudy place
To scare me, thus employed, with that pure face!
I need not fear this audience, I make free
With them, but then this is no place for thee!
65 The thunder-phrase of the Athenian, grown
Up out of memories of Marathon,
Would echo like his own sword's griding screech
Braying a Persian shield, - the silver speech
Of Sidney's self, the starry paladin,
70 Turn intense as a trumpet sounding in
The knights to tilt, - wert thou to hear! What
heart
Have I to play my puppets, bear my part

Before these worthies?

Lo, the past is hurled
In twain: up-thrust, out-staggering on the world,
75 Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears
Its outline, kindles at the core, appears
Verona.

The opening section of Sordello is characteristic of the poem as a whole, for instance in the way in which we see the narrator stating his vision and then deviating from this with personal asides. Verona appears, but the narrator immediately negates its first appearance with the word 'Never' - to tell us of his narrative technique. The second time Verona appears, he immediately commands 'stay' (rather than 'Never') while he addresses Shelley. It is only when Verona appears for the third time that the vision is left uninterrupted, and seen with full dramatic impact. In narrative commentary and imaginative exchanges with Sordello, we will see similar asides which undercut what we were just beginning to believe as true. For example, we see Sordello introduced as 'foremost in the regal clan' (1,467) chosen by Nature, only to have the question thrown at us a few lines later, 'How can such love?' (1,483). This undermining of what has seemed authoritative statement frequently leaves the reader thrown as he must piece together as much of the true tale as he can for himself. This challenge to the reader, as mentioned earlier, may be both provocative and frustrating. Following the claims made by the Romantic poets and critics, Browning is taking quite a new direction in investigating this area of poetic authority. The narrator interrupts his own narrative twice after only two words of it; the reader would be unusual who did not ask what kind of a narrator he was, and, from this, what kind of character. The kind of authority with which we invest him at the start will have its affect when we come to assess the significance of his comments about Sordello and other characters.

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The opening lines concern the narrator's position in relation to his audience; although powerful to tell his tale, he is also vulnerable since he has to gain his audience's belief if his tale is to have any validity in their minds. The tone of the first line is uncompromising: 'Who will, may hear Sordello's story told'. (1,1) This indicates the need for positive decision on the audience's part. It also indicates that the narrator is unwilling to go out of his way to make

the story easy; 'if you want to hear, you may' implies also, 'if you do not want to, then you won't'. The idea behind the line may derive from Wordsworth and Coleridge, the theory (as expressed in the section on Imagination in Biographia Literaria for instance) that in order to receive imaginatively, one must first give imaginatively. Of 'secondary' imagination, Coleridge says it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create...It is essentially vital'.¹ The receptive mind which receives blessings is not merely passive, but has put itself actively into a state to receive such. If the reader 'believes' (1,2) the narrator, he will be in a position to follow Sordello's fortunes like the narrator; this is again more active than simply being told them by the narrator.

The narrator presents himself as an isolated figure, like 'the friendless - people's friend' (1,4) who is apart from 'the din/And dust of multitudes' on 'his hill top' (1,5-6). As Don Quixote had managed to discern Pentapolin through the dust, the narrator is also far-seeing. Although Sordello is

compassed murkily about
With ravage of six long sad hundred years.
(1,8-9)

the narrator is able to single him out through this obscurity.

The narrator has briefly told his audience of his ability to single out Sordello but now the tagged-on line, 'Only believe me. Ye believe?' (1,10) with the rapidity implied by the close repetition of the word 'believe' and the short sentences indicates an appeal by a narrator less confident than the opening implies. The question looks like a nervous checking-up on the reader's response, but with no time for any answer before the narrator dashes onto 'Appears/Verona' (1,10-11). The line also implies the spontaneous, simple belief needed; the word 'only' (1,10) suggests that the belief should be easy, effortless like the belief of a child. The simplicity of this short sentence may appear enough to the reader to make one wish to believe. That said, the

reader's effort will be in allowing himself this belief when he has only been given the slightest indication of the narrator's powers, in what the latter has described but not yet shown, of his abilities. The assertion that he is able to single out Sordello through the chaotic history that surrounded him is the only basis so far for the reader's belief.

However, if the reader grants belief and reads on, the next words, 'Appears/Verona' (1,10-11) seem to justify his faith. The inversion of the words and the hesitation between the words indicated by the line-change give the effect of a gradually-emerging image. It suggests involuntary vision granted to the narrator; the image 'appears' rather than being summoned deliberately. It also suggests his power in that this vision appears to him immediately following his decision to 'single out/Sordello' (1,7-8); his penetrating eye has set the scene and now the image of the city appears for him. The sense of the vision appearing involuntarily is emphasized by the way in which, at the appearance of Verona, the narrator immediately turns aside from the image with his 'Never, - I should warn you first' (1,11). The force of the interruption shows some personal unreadiness to proceed with the vision offered; it also shows his power; he can afford to put this vision of Verona on one side a little longer while he explains more of his state of mind to his audience.

What he actually says of himself in the interruption emphasizes this feeling of involuntariness, and with it the reader's increased confidence in a narrator to whom visions come unbidden. However it also shows us the narrator's personal uneasiness - he needs to warn us of his dilemma; it is not his 'own' (1,12) choice to tell the story in the way he is about to; he feels he could do it as well by keeping himself (including his opinions and anxieties) 'out of view' (1,14) and making Sordello speak for himself. This would leave the reader free to make up his own mind about him - 'leaving you to say the rest for him' (1,16). Although the narrator may be proud to see 'this one man' (1,19) emerge

from the past because it 'pleased' (1,20) him, that is as a result of a whim, he would prefer after this opening moment, to follow Sordello's progress without advance knowledge of what is to happen, as if he were also a member of the audience. Indeed, if he were able to watch as if part of the audience, he would take 'delight' (1,21) in following Sordello's progress. This implies that there is substance to come in which his audience will find entertainment.

However, he thinks that

Your setters-forth of unexampled themes,
Makers of quite new men

(1,26-7)

should take more of a teaching position than that. It is better that he explains the unfamiliar clearly; he

Would best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem
The wearer's quality

(1,28-9)

The alternative to this is to present his character as though he were a jester or *mountebank* figure:

Motley on back and pointing-pole in hand,
Beside him.

(1,30-31)

As the Oxford Edition's note on this line says, this implies 'some crude dramatic entertainment' (OE, p.196). In this, the narrator will be pointing out details to the audience. His being 'Beside' (1,31) Sordello may imply his being like a demonstrator in a diorama, as suggested by Stempel in his essay: 'Browning's Sordello: The Art of the Makers - See'. It may also indicate that the suggestion of narrator as fool in the word 'motley' is to be borne in mind. We sometimes discover more of Sordello in comparison, or contrast to, the narrator. Although this is not stated overtly in the poem, we often find our sympathies to

Sordello challenged by the narrator's comments, where for instance in Book 11, 415 seq. the narrator shows, in a quasi-dialogue with Sordello, how the latter has become far too unrealistic. Sordello is imagining a future in which the world will bow in 'unexampled worship' (11,414) of him; the narrator immediately points out how misguided Sordello is.

Despite the narrator's expressed preference for not acting as demonstrator, but as viewer of the scene, there is a sense of challenge in his 'So, for once I face ye, friends' (1,31). The 'for once' indicates the newness of this stance, reminding us of the anxiety of 'Only believe me. Ye believe?' (1,10). This new power is emphasized when we read the extent from which he has 'summoned' (1,32) his friends:

Summoned together from the world's four ends,
Dropped down from heaven or cast up from hell,
To hear the story I propose to tell.

(1,32-4)

The narrator is indicating that some kind of supernatural power is behind him. If fate denies him a live audience, he is able to muster a crowd from the dead. He says that it is 'spite' (1,41) which has been fate's motivation to deny him real people's emotions to be affected by his tale. Just because fate can

refuse

Real eyes to glisten more, real hearts to ache
Less oft, real brows turn smoother for [the poet's]
sake

(1,38-40)

she cannot also choose whether he sings or is silent. In the world of the dead, where she 'has no right' (1,42), he has many lovers.

We may contrast this pride in summoning an audience of his own with the narrator's scorn for Sordello communicating

with nature, 'As if the poppy felt with him!' (1,705). Later Sordello imagines: 'A stream of lifelike figures through his brain' (1,767). This stage of Sordello's life teaches him of imagination but, as shown in the rest of the poem, leaves him inadequate when it comes to insight into real people. With this in mind, the narrator's boasts look less magical perhaps; he cannot in the end outdo fate. This does not affect the narrator's mood of pride; like Sordello he does not realise the lack of substance in his claims. The narrator instead gives himself credit for having persuaded the dead back:

What else should tempt them back to taste our air
Except to see how their successors fare?

(1,47-8)

This audience is making the effort the narrator has already indicated will be needed:

each ghostly man
Striving to look as living as he can,
Brother by breathing brother

(1,49-51)

He sees them as individuals, the 'Clear-witted critic' (1,52) beside one not as talented, but he does not want to 'fret/
A wondrous soul of them, nor move death's spleen' (1,52-3) since death does not like to let them out. He endows the ghosts with the wish to look living, and perhaps the fact that they are described as 'breathing' (1,51) indicates the poet's power; drawn back to hear him, they become alive. There is something peculiar going on here; the narrator is anxious over his living audience and will not go out of his way to woo them; they must want to make the effort themselves. But he will summon up a dead audience. The narrator turns from the dead to address his friends among 'The living in good earnest' (1,55) who are among the elect 'Chiefly for love' (1,56) and tells them that he does not reject 'Judicious praise' (1,57), presumably meaning praise which contains criticism also. On the contrary, he will

'peep' (1,57) out at a fitting occasion to ensure that they are not asleep and to gain their gentle 'approvals' (1,59).

Having said this, the narrator summons Verona far more powerfully than hitherto. He has spoken of his anxieties and the responses from his audience for which he hopes and now much more actively comes the appearance of Verona: 'Then, appear,/Verona!' (1,59-60). This time the interruption is due to someone else - the narrator is at once alarmed by the 'pure face' (1,62) of Shelley. It is Browning's commentary that provides the information that Shelley is the pure-faced poet, and, without this knowledge, the narrator's wish to keep away this spirit is similar to that of a Latin charm, to provide himself with a kind of protection by saying whom he does not want around. Shelley, far from being one of the spirits controlled by the narrator, is all too alive and immediate for him. However, it is clear that the one he wants away is by no means evil in himself; it is simply that the narrator fears his verse would sound grating in comparison with the purity of Shelley. He says that the 'thunder-phrase of the Athenian' (1,65)

Would echo like his own sword's griding speech
Braying a Persian shield

(1,67-8)

that is, would sound as grim as battle-noises, with the implication of confusion and wounding. Again we see the narrator as unsure of himself. The Ohio edition says that 'the Athenian' refers to Aeschylus and to the fact that Shelley's Hellas resembles Persae (Ohio E,p.371). In comparison with Shelley's, Aeschylus' drama is confused and harsh. Even 'the silver speech/Of Sidney's self' (1,68-9) would sound to Shelley's ears as

intense as a trumpet sounding in
The knights to tilt

(1,70-71)

Although the phrase 'sounding in' gains an object in the following line, the force of the line's end pause gives this phrase a reflexive feel, particularly following the word 'intense'; it is as though the music will turn on itself, and thus become jarring. Shelley's 'pure face' will distort the very language of the poet, making what was lovely self-destructive, grating. It makes him lose heart. When Shelley is near, the narrator's visions appear as 'puppets' (1,72) and his position merely a 'part' (1,72). His audience is still composed of 'worthies' (1,73) but now he sees himself as less than them, rather than still believing them his friends from whom he wishes judicious praise.

Immediately following this, it is clear that he has managed to banish Shelley and now Verona appears with full drama. This image indicates the chaos of the age he is to describe. The image of Verona appears explosively and violently: 'Lo, the past is hurled/In twain' (1,73-4). It is as though the narrator is plunging in and dragging the past apart; for a time all is confusion, a 'darkness' (1,75) is 'up-thrust, out-staggering on the world' (1,74). The reader feels as if the summoned past cannot bear contact with the world as it now is - it staggers out. The inversions in 'up-thrust' and 'out-staggering' emphasize the violence of the vision's appearance. It is only when the chaos subsides that the core of the darkness, that is, Verona, can appear, initially as two-dimensionally as a silhouette. This vision indicates the pain associated with a troubled birth and so the vision seems now at last closer to the narrator.

This sense of a disruptive birth gives the impression, not only of the narrator's active involvement, but also of his being overtaken by his own vision. The hesitant, tentative character of the narrator, as seen for example in his anxiety at Shelley's appearance, is overtaken, and even submerged, by the force of this sudden and violent image. This sort of plunge into imaginative vision is similar to Sordello's experience when he wins at the contest (discussed in the previous chapter) because totally immersed in his creative

image. In this immersion, the narrator is at last endowed with the authority of the seer, in a way that we could not have predicted from his hesitant opening; yet the knowledge of this hesitancy and self doubt remains with us through the poem.

Extract from Sordello, Book 1, 374-444

In Mantua territory half is slough,
375 Half pine-tree forest; maples, scarlet oaks
Breed o'er the river-beds; even Mincio chokes
With sand the summer through: but 't is morass
In winter up to Mantua walls. There was,
Some thirty years before this evening's coil,
380 One spot reclaimed from the surrounding spoil,
Goito; just a castle built amid
A few low mountains; firs and larches hid
Their main defiles, and rings of vineyard bound
The rest. Some captured creature in a pound,
385 Whose artless wonder quite precludes distress,
Secure beside in its own loveliness,
So peered with airy head, below, above,
The castle at its toils, the lapwings love
To glean among at grape-time. Pass within.
390 A maze of corridors contrived for sin,
Dusk winding-stairs, dim galleries got past,
You gain the inmost chambers, gain at last
A maple-panelled room: that haze which seems
Floating about the panel, if there gleams
395 A sunbeam over it, will turn to gold
And in light-graven characters unfold
The Arab's wisdom everywhere; what shade
Marred them a moment, those slim pillars made,
Cut like a company of palms to prop
400 The roof, each kissing top entwined with top,
Leaning together; in the carver's mind
Some knot of bacchanals, flushed cheek
 combined
With straining forehead, shoulders purpled, hair
Diffused between, who in a goat-skin bear
405 A vintage; graceful sister-palms! But quick
To the main wonder, now. A vault, see; thick
Black shade about the ceiling, though fine slits
Across the buttress suffer light by fits

Upon a marvel in the midst. Nay, stoop -
410 A dullish grey-streaked cumbrous font, a group
Round it, - each side of it, where'er one sees, -
Upholds it; shrinking Caryatides
Of just-tinged marble like Eve's lilled flesh
Beneath her maker's finger when the fresh
415 First pulse of life shot brightening the snow.
The font's edge burthens every shoulder, so
They muse upon the ground, eyelids half closed;
Some, with meek arms behind their backs
disposed,
Some, crossed above their bosoms, some, to veil
Their eyes, some, propping chin and cheek so
420 pale,
Some, hanging slack an utter helpless length
Dead as a buried vestal whose whole strength
Goes when the grate above shuts heavily.
So dwell these noiseless girls, patient to see,
425 Like priestesses because of sin impure
Penanced for ever, who resigned endure,
Having that once drunk sweetness to the dregs.
And every eve, Sordello's visit begs
Pardon for them: constant as eve he came
430 To sit beside each in her turn, the same
As one of them, a certain space: and awe
Made a great indistinctness till he saw
Sunset slant cheerful through the buttress-chinks,
Gold seven times globed; surely our maiden
shrinks
435 And a smile stirs her as if one faint grain
Her load were lightened, one shade less the stain
Obscured her forehead, yet one more bead slipt
From off the rosary whereby the crypt
Keeps count of the contritions of its charge?
440 Then with a step more light, a heart more large,
He may depart, leave her and every one
To linger out the penance in mute stone.
Ah, but Sordello? 'T is the tale I mean
To tell you.

For all its notorious difficulty, Sordello is at times powerfully lyrical, as in this description of the castle at Goito, where Sordello spends his childhood and youth. The description indicates both potential for rich experience and the way in which this is trapped; the castle could thus be seen not only as literal description of Sordello's situation, but also as a metaphor for Sordello himself. It serves to set the mood for our first sight of Sordello as a youth.

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Like the description we have read (1,330 seq.) of Sordello with Palma, where Sordello is seen moving from sleep to clear-headed activity, Goito is governed by extremes. It is a mixture of lushness and aridity. Even the moist elements are not necessarily fruitful: 'In Mantua territory half is slough' (1,374). The image of the cool lakes surrounding Mantua is inviting, but due to the slough one cannot get near them; Browning's line well indicates a sense of the real place. The maples and oaks which breed over the river beds give a warmth due to their colour associations of golden and brown, as well as to the fertility shown in their breeding. However, we next hear that Mincio chokes with sand during the summer. In this kind of infertile excess, the reverse is true in winter:

't is morass

In winter up to Mantua walls.

(1,377-8)

Thirty years before this particular evening's turmoil however, Goito was reclaimed from the surrounding useless land. The reference to 'this evening's coil' (1,379) reminds us that we are to keep the disturbed evening in mind - and also points a contrast with the seeming peace of the reclaimed spot. The description of Goito as 'just a castle' (1,381) contrasts with the previous oppressive description of how

Ecelin built his castles:

sadness fills

Them all, for Ecelin vouchsafes to stay
Among and care about them; day by day
Choosing this pinnacle, the other spot,
A castle building to defend a cot,
A cot built for a castle to defend,
Nothing but castles, castles

(1,260-66)

Goito is very different; it does not encroach on its surroundings; its immediate setting of 'A few low mountains' (1,382) is attractive and it is a refuge from, as well as being enclosed by, the surrounding harsher environment. The Oxford edition's note on the line: 'Some captured creature in a pound' (1,384) reads: 'the strange comparison of the castle to a captured bird or animal is characteristic of Browning. The 'rings of vineyard' become 'toils' or nets for the capture of game' (OE, p.214). However, the comparison seems more significant than implied here. The creature is captured, but it is not in distress, its enclosure keeps it safe; and moreover 'its own loveliness' (1,386) keeps it secure. There is perhaps a comparison with Sordello, reared in this unreal world; he is free within it and able to look about him but, due to his isolation, is captured in a profound sense. The 'creature' in the pound is able to peer confidently - 'with airy head' (1,387) - at the 'toils' of the castle. The toils have captured it but are now harmless both to it and to the lapwings, which 'love' to glean 'at grape-time' (1,388-9). They too are unthreatened when they glean from the castle, and it seems possible that the word 'toils' could be referring as much to the work of the castle as to the traps for the game. The creature in the pound, unlike the lapwings, is not able to move so freely - it may seem content as prisoner but cannot develop in relation to its kind - and the same is true of Sordello; in his childhood he seems free to do as he pleases, but his learning is not in relation to the outside world, so he is very much a prisoner.

Here, however, the emphasis seems to be on security and so when the narrator tells us to 'Pass within' (1,389), the 'maze of corridors contrived for sin' (1,390) seems fascinating rather than immediately sinister. It contrasts with the description of the secret alcove in Ferrara where we have seen Sordello and Palma; there a recess is discovered to 'lurk' (1,318) behind the banquet-rooms and which could be used for murderous purposes. The mood here is calmer, while being sexual too perhaps, in the movement towards gaining 'the inmost chambers' (1,392). This emphasizes the sense that we are entering the realms of intensely private experience. The setting itself is extremely private, and we imagine Sordello exploring the scene with similar intensity. The movement here feels initially slow and vague. To start with, the corridors are seen as a 'maze' (1,390), so it is likely that one will get lost. However, they are also 'contrived' (1,390), so it is clear that they were designed with this in mind; the person to become lost in them is not dangerously lost, there is a sense of choice here.² It is a castle of ambiguities; we have seen just previous to this how the 'captured creature' feels 'secure' in its own loveliness and feels no distress. The corridors in the maze are softly lit - the imagery could be frightening were it not for the gentleness of the rhythm: 'Dusk winding-stairs, dim galleries got past' (1,391). When the 'inmost chambers' are reached, the narrator says they have been gained; one has not been involuntarily enticed, or tricked, to get there. As Isobel Armstrong points out when speaking of this passage, 'The imperatives and exclamations are used very much as gestures insisting not only upon the immediacy of the reader's experience but also upon making him conscious of it'.³ There is a sense of slow, peaceful movement in the 'maple-panelled room' (1,393). The haze seems to be 'Floating' (1,394). A sunbeam will turn the panel to gold and reveal the elegance of 'light-graven characters' which 'unfold/ The Arab's wisdom everywhere' (1,396-7). It may be significant that shade 'Marred' (1,398) there, but the shade lasts only 'a moment' and is caused only by 'slim pillars' (1,398) which lean together elegantly, 'each kissing top entwined with top' (1,400).

This graceful, pleasing movement is left however as we are beckoned to the main wonder. The 'marvel' (1,409) under the 'thick/Black shade' (1,406-7) of the vault is a passive group of nymphs, 'shrinking Caryatides' (1,412) whose shoulders are burdened by the font. They may be externally as perfect as 'Eve's lilled flesh/Beneath her maker's finger' (1,413-4), but as the description goes on we see them utterly passive, in contrast to:

the fresh
First pulse of life shot brightening the snow.
(1,414-5)

Some are able to 'muse' (1,417), some are seen with 'meek arms behind their backs' (1,418). But the descriptions become sadder; some use their arms 'to veil/Their eyes, some, propping chin and cheek so pale' (1,419-20) and the last described are utterly helpless:

Some, hanging slack an utter helpless length
Dead as a buried vestal whose whole strength
Goes when the grate above shuts heavily.
(1,421-3)

The feeling of a dungeon here turns out to be right when we see the girls described as being:

Like priestesses because of sin impure
Penanced for ever
(1,425-6)

The only note of hope is that they have 'that once drunk sweetness to the dregs.' (1,427) which gives them the strength to endure their grim punishment.

Sordello is sympathetic to them - and this serves as a hint that he is associated with a type of person who becomes immersed in whole experience and pleasure without conscious forethought. Sordello, like us, has explored the interior of the castle, which provides him with the intense mood

that leads to this sympathy. The progress is not dissimilar from that I have discussed in the previous chapter of his moving through nature and from his imagination to the climax of the contest.

constant as eve he came
To sit beside each in her turn

(1,429-30)

There could here be a pun on 'eve'. At evening, Sordello is coming to see girls who, like Eve, have lapsed into sin, but, like Eve, can endure their punishment. He is constant to the girls in the way Eve was constant to Adam following the fall. The narrator seems to approve his sympathy though it is not clear if the thought:

surely our maiden shrinks
And a smile stirs her as if one faint grain
Her load were lightened

(1,434-6)

is the narrator's or is in style indirect²libre. We see here the beginning of an interpretative problem through the poem; how much is the narrator observing Sordello? How much is he creating him? How much of the above thought is the narrator's and how much Sordello's? It seems here that it could be largely Sordello's when we are told how he may leave her 'with a step more light, a heart more large' (1,440). The following lines are more obviously the narrator's:

He may depart, leave her and every one
To linger out the penance in mute stone.

(1,441-2)

It brings us as well as the narrator back to the fact that she is only made of stone and is, in fact, incapable of complaint, or indeed of speech of any kind. We have just seen how readily Sordello becomes imaginatively connected with passive objects and willing to give them life.

Now the narrator turns back more overtly to Sordello. The 'Ah, but Sordello?' (1,443) is a reminder that he is real, unlike the girls, and is to be the substance of the work. However, at once we are also reminded that his is a 'tale' (1,443) and so may too be invented, this time by the narrator. This word, 'tale' reminds us too that so far we have had some description of Sordello's surroundings but little of himself.

Extract from Sordello, Book 11, 352-473

In short,
Apollo vanished; a mean youth, just named
His lady's minstrel, was to be proclaimed
355 - How shall I phrase it? - Monarch of the
World!
For, on the day when that array was furled
Forever, and in place of one a slave
To longings, wild indeed, but longings save
In dreams as wild, suppressed - one daring not
360 Assume the mastery such dreams allot,
Until a magical equipment, strength,
Grace, wisdom, decked him too, - he chose at
length,
Content with unproved wits and failing frame,
In virtue of his simple will, to claim
365 That mastery, no less - to do his best
With means so limited, and let the rest
Go by, - the seal was set: never again
Sordello could in his own sight remain
One of the many, one with hopes and cares
370 And interests nowise distinct from theirs,
Only peculiar in a thriveless store
Of fancies, which were fancies and no more;
Never again for him and for the crowd
A common law was challenged and allowed
375 If calmly reasoned of, howe'er denied
By a mad impulse nothing justified
Short of Apollo's presence. The divorce
Is clear: why needs Sordello square his course
By any known example? Men no more
380 Compete with him than tree and flower before.
Himself, inactive, yet is greater far
Than such an act, each stooping to his star,
Acquiring thence his function; he has gained
The same result with meaner mortals trained
385 To strength or beauty, moulded to express
Each the idea that rules him; since no less

He comprehends that function, but can still
 Embrace the others, take of might his fill
 With Richard as of grace with Palma, mix
 390 Their qualities, or for a moment fix
 On one; abiding free meantime, uncramped
 By any partial organ, never stamped
 Strong, and to strength turning all energies -
 Wise, and restricted to becoming wise -
 395 That is, he loves not, nor possesses One
 Idea that, star-like over, lures him on
 To its exclusive purpose. "Fortunate!
 "This flesh of mine ne'er strove to emulate
 "A soul so various - took no casual mould
 400 "Of the first fancy and, contracted, cold,
 "Clogged her forever - soul averse to change
 "As flesh: whereas flesh leaves soul free to
 range,
 "Remains itself a blank, cast into shade,
 "Encumbers little, if it cannot aid.
 "So, range, free soul! - who, by
 405 self-consciousness,
 "The last drop of all beauty dost express -
 "The grace of seeing grace, a quintessence
 "For thee: while for the world, that can
 dispense
 "Wonder on men who, themselves, wonder -
 make
 410 "A shift to love at second-hand, and take
 "For idols those who do but idolize,
 "Themselves, - the world that counts men
 strong or wise,
 "Who, themselves, court strength, wisdom, - it
 shall bow
 "Surely in unexampled worship now,
 "Discerning me!" -
 415 (Dear Monarch, I beseech,
 Notice how lamentably wide a breach
 Is here: discovering this, discover too
 What our poor world has possibly to do
 With it! As pigmy natures as you please -

420 So much the better for you; take your ease,
 Look on, and laugh; style yourself God alone;
 Strangle some day with a cross olive-stone!
 All that is right enough: but why want us
 To know that you yourself know thus and thus?)
 425 "The world shall bow to me conceiving all
 "Man's life, who sees its blisses, great and small,
 "Afar - not tasting any; no machine
 "To exercise my utmost will is mine:
 "Be mine mere consciousness! Let men perceive
 430 "What I could do, a mastery believe,
 "Asserted and established to the throng
 "By their selected evidence of song
 "Which now shall prove, whate'er they are, or
 seek
 "To be, I am - whose words, not actions speak,
 435 "Who change no standards of perfection, vex
 "With no strange forms created to perplex,
 "But just perform their bidding and no more,
 "At their own satiating-point give o'er,
 "While each shall love in me the love that leads
 "His soul to power's perfection." Song, not
 440 deeds
 (For we get tired) was chosen. Fate would brook
 Mankind no other organ; he would look
 For not another channel to dispense
 His own volition by, receive men's sense
 445 Of its supremacy - would live content,
 Obstructed else, with merely verse for vent.
 Nor should, for instance, strength an outlet seek
 And, striving, be admired: nor grace bespeak
 Wonder, displayed in gracious attitudes:
 Nor wisdom, poured forth, change unseemly
 450 moods;
 But he would give and take on song's one point:
 Like some huge throbbing stone that, poised
 a-joint,
 Sounds, to affect on its basaltic bed,
 Must sue in just one accent; tempests shed

455 Thunder, and raves the windstorm: only let
That key by any little noise be set -
The far benighted hunter's halloo pitch
On that, the hungry curlew chance to scritch
Or serpent hiss it, rustling through the rift,
460 However loud, however low - all lift
The groaning monster, stricken to the heart.
Lo ye, the world's concernment, for its part,
And this, for his, will hardly interfere!
Its businesses in blood and blaze this year
465 But wile the hour away - a pastime slight
Till he shall step upon the platform: right!
And, now thus much is settled, cast in rough,
Proved feasible, be counselled! thought
enough, -
Slumber, Sordello! any day will serve:
470 Were it a less digested plan! how swerve
To-morrow? Meanwhile eat these sun-dried
grapes,
And watch the soaring hawk there! Life escapes
Merrily thus.

This passage shows Sordello's ambitions and the workings of his mind following his position as Palma's minstrel. He is attempting to work out his position in relation to the world, while remaining certain of his own importance. His decision to choose 'song' as his future path is described with sarcasm by the narrator, who indicates that Sordello's motivation for this is partly laziness and also that he will have little impact on the world in such a direction while he idles time away in dreams.

--O--

He has already been disappointed in his relationship to the living objects and dreams surrounding him at Goito and now his vision of himself as Apollo leaves as well. Sordello, having heard of his real birth, no longer able to harbour superhuman pretensions, now has worldly ones:

In short,
Apollo vanished; a mean youth, just named
His lady's minstrel, was to be proclaimed
- How shall I phrase it? - Monarch of the World!
(11,352-5)

The ambition seems equally unrealistic since at present, although 'His lady's minstrel', Sordello is seen as 'a mean youth'.

The syntax of the next few lines is not clear.⁴ When Sordello's 'array' (11,356) of the brilliance associated with minstrelsy is put away, he is no longer 'a slave/
To longings' (11,357-8). These longings, presumably for a position as Apollo-like poet, were 'wild' but were 'suppressed' except in 'dreams as wild' (11,358-9). He did not however assume the mastery allotted by such dreams, unless:

a magical equipment, strength,
Grace, wisdom, decked him too
(11,361-2)

These are the qualities with which he has endowed his imaginary people previously. Although he has not dared take the mastery allotted by dreams, he now chooses that mastery 'no less' (11,365) 'In virtue of his simple will' (11,364). He wants to do this through will-power:

Content with unproved wits and failing frame

(11,363)

This is reminiscent of Paracelsus starting on his quest with no real basis to assure success. He is however content to do his best within his limited means. The Oxford Edition's gloss does not comment on this phrase: 'and let the rest/Go by' (11,366-7). It seems to imply that Sordello will succeed where he can, but not concern himself where he cannot. The phrase has a casual ring about it, a sort of willed recklessness, implying Sordello's lack of concern in areas where he cannot succeed.

In any case, 'the seal was set' (11,367) and Sordello can never again perceive himself as 'One of the many' (11,369). His 'hopes and cares/And interests' (11,369) are distinct from theirs. He can no longer see himself as only peculiar in relation to the crowd because of 'a thriveless store/Of fancies' (11,371-2). At that earlier time, he could see these as 'fancies and no more' (11,372). Never again would he see a common law as relevant for both himself and 'the crowd' (11,373) if he challenged and calmly reasoned about it. This calm reasoning was carried out but then the idea of it had been 'denied/By a mad impulse' (11,375) that would be justified by nothing 'Short of Apollo's presence' (11,377). Sordello is now clearly separate from others as he perceives them; he now believes he need not follow any known, pre-justified path:

The divorce

Is clear: why needs Sordello square his course
By any known example?

(11,377-9)

He sees himself as now above men in the way he used to be above trees and flowers. Although Sordello is inactive, he believes himself to be greater than anyone who acts since he is following only 'his star' (11,382) acquiring his function from that. Sordello believes he has gained the same result as:

meaner mortals trained
To strength or beauty

(11,384-5)

These 'meaner mortals' are more type-cast than Sordello,

moulded to express
Each the idea that rules him

(11,385-6)

Sordello, however, can understand this way of having a particular function 'but can still/Embrace the others' (11,387-8) in his mind, taking his fill of 'might' with Richard or of 'grace' with Palma (11,388-9). He can 'mix/Their qualities' (11,389-90) or fix on one of them for a moment. These are both qualities in the 'magical equipment' he previously felt he needed to fulfil his dreams. In his chameleon-like ability to choose on which qualities to concentrate, he himself remains free since he is not cramped by any 'partial organ' (11,392), unlike ordinary men who aspire to one function which limits their progress even as they follow that function. He has not been for instance 'stamped/Strong' (11,392-3) and so turned all his energies to being strong, or been designated 'Wise' (11,394) and so been restricted to being wise. He has no one idea that lures him on to that exclusively. In a sense, then, we see him avoiding Paracelsus' fault of following too narrow an aim.

We now see Sordello himself in thought. He sees himself as fortunate that his body has never tried to follow 'so various' (11,399) a soul as his. He is pleased that he has not simply laid hold of the 'first fancy' (11,400) that occurs to him and, having been contracted by it as in a

mould, and having hardened when cold, been clogged up by it forever. The soul would have been as unwilling to change as the flesh. Instead of this, what happens now is that the flesh leaves the soul 'free to range' (11,402). If it does not aid the soul, at least it does not inhibit it:

" 'Remains itself a blank, cast into shade "
(11,403)

Sordello's vision of how his soul will proceed is grandiose:

" 'So, range, free soul! - who, by self-consciousness,
'The last drop of all beauty dost express - "
(11,405-6)

By being self-aware, he believes his soul will express "'The last drop of all beauty'" (11,406). 'Express' here has the emphasis of extracting beauty. Sordello may plan also to express this beauty for others to see, but this meaning of 'express' as 'extract' emphasizes the earlier image of Sordello as like

" the great palmer-worm that strips the trees,
Eats the life out of every luscious plant "
(1,632-3)

When the caterpillar has stripped the plants, it metamorphoses and 'hies him after unforeseen delight' (1,636). Sordello's attitude here is very similar to this earlier passage; he may express beauty and believe he has "'The grace of seeing grace' (11,407), but for the rest of the world, second-hand wonder is all they can achieve. The people of the world give others wonder, and these reciprocate. These people:

" take
For idols those who do but idolize "
(11,410-11)

Most vainly of all, from our viewpoint, Sordello concludes that if people count others 'strong or wise' (11,412) who

are themselves seeking strength and wisdom, they will surely worship Sordello totally when they discern him.

The brackets from line 415 to 424 indicate that now the narrator is addressing Sordello. It is initially unclear quite what is the tone of 'Dear Monarch' (11,415). Reading on, it looks as if sarcasm is mingled with a sort of affection despite the narrator's sense of his superiority. The 'breach' referred to by the narrator as 'lamentably wide' (11,416) is presumably between Sordello and the world, though it could refer also to the breach between Sordello in actuality and his opinion of himself. Sordello might do himself some good, if he, as beseeched by the narrator, would notice how wide the breach is. It is a similar split to that between poet and world in Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' of 1832:

'And while the world runs round and round,' I said,
'Reign thou apart, a quiet king...'

(The Palace of Art, 13-14)

With Tennyson, the split between imaginative separation from, and superiority over, the world, and how wrong this is, is emphasized. In discovering this breach, Sordello would also discover the extent of the world's involvement. The phrase:

discover too
What our poor world has possibly to do
With it!

(11,417-9)

seems to indicate that Sordello is more associated with the world than he would like to believe, and also, that the world has nothing to do with the 'lamentable' breach. While, however, Sordello regards others as having 'pigmy natures' (11,419), it seems the better for him - and leads him to extreme arrogance and a more intense feeling of separation from the world, as described in the narrator's sarcastic lines:

As pigmy natures as you please -
So much the better for you; take your ease,
Look on, and laugh; style yourself God alone

In the end he is just as likely to die through choking on an olive-stone. Fair enough if that is what happens, continues the narrator, but there is no reason to impose his knowledge on the world with whom he recognises no connection:

All that is right enough: but why want us
To know that you yourself know thus and thus?)
(11,423-4)

In recommencing his musings, Sordello partly answers this last question:

'The world shall bow to me conceiving all
'Man's life, who sees its blisses, great and small,
'Afar - not tasting any
(11,425-7)

He is exalting himself to the position of a god. However, he recognises that he is not quite a god; he has no 'machine' to exercise his 'utmost will' (11,427-8) - this contrasts with his earlier notion that his

soul
'Hunting a body out may gain its whole
'Desire some day!'
(1,835-7)

Now his situation is different; he is proud that he can see all man's 'blisses' (11,426). Although he has no way to act out his utmost will, he wishes 'mere [pure] consciousness' (11,429) to be his.

He believes that if men understand what he can do, having established his 'mastery' (11,430) in song, they would love him for the sake of his love that leads them to perfection. In song he intends to show that he is what they are, or would seek to be. His words speak, rather than actions, and he does not attempt to create 'strange forms' to 'perplex' (11,436) them but will stop at their 'satiating-point' (11,438). This suggests a limit, or a lack of challenge in Sordello's

ambitions; he has no idea of moving onto unknown areas in his poetry. This lack of challenge is emphasized when the narrator's comment deflates any feeling we might have had of Sordello's partial generosity in not going over his listeners' heads. The narrator says that Sordello chose songs merely because deeds are too tiring, which comment leads us back to remember how Sordello let his rough bow fall while imagining great deeds of strength. We may here remember that Apollo was god both of poetry and medicine; one need not exclude the other; in Apollo they were complementary. The narrator's sarcastic comment indicates clearly Sordello's lack of stamina: 'Song, not deeds, / (For we get tired) was chosen.' (11,440-41). He feels that his song will be beneficial to mankind, and also that his singing has been decided by Fate; he had no choice available to him to choose any more tiring occupation: 'Fate would brook / Mankind no other organ' (11,441-2). In using this as the channel for his will, Sordello expects to receive men's sense of the supremacy of that will:

he would look
 For not another channel to dispense
 His own volition by, receive men's sense
 Of its supremacy

(11,442-5)

Other ways of living would leave Sordello 'Obstructed' (11,446). Verse will be his only means of expression. Even if strength were to seek 'an outlet' (11,447) and be admired, or grace gain wonder, or wisdom 'change unseemly moods' (11,450) (all three qualities repeated many times in the poem as admired by Sordello), he would still put all into poetry: 'he would give and take on song's one point ' (11,451). Song would be like sounds that affect 'some huge throbbing stone' poised on a joint on 'its basaltic bed' (11,452-3). To affect the stone, the sounds must be constant, they 'Must sue in just one accent' (11,454). Huge events like tempests may not affect the tone but a particular tone 'However loud, however low' (11,460) will cause it to sound. These particular

noises

all lift

The groaning monster, stricken to the heart.

(11,460-61)

This passage (11,452-461) is difficult to sort out, but the essence of its meaning seems to be that, although the song of one man may be small it can have huge, far-reaching effects which generalized noise or roar, like thunder, cannot have. Here is arguably a point where the fact that particular meaning is not immediately clear is related to the sense of what is being said. The reader has to penetrate the sense of chaos to discover the message, just as the particular note will affect the huge stone through the chaos of tempests and windstorm. However the narrator is mocking about the sounds which affect the stone; they may be from a lost hunter, an accidental 'scritch' (11,458) of the curlew, or a snake's hiss. None of these sounds is made with the intention of a particular impact, except that of the shout of the hunter - who is lost. Thus, we may question the significance of the noise on the stone, or in the world. The sounds Sordello makes have no wider meaning.

So, again, the narrator deflates Sordello's vision - the world's concerns and Sordello's are irrelevant to each other at this point:

Lo ye, the world's concernment, for its part,
And this, for his, will hardly interfere!

(11,462-3)

This whole passage shows how Sordello has persuaded himself into a justification of his song - making ambition that has no basis in the reality of the lives around him. With this in his mind, he becomes idle, and wiles away the time. The narrator becomes more ironic:

Slumber, Sordello! any day will serve

(11,469)

He may as well go on indulging in temporary pleasures:

 Meanwhile eat these sun-dried grapes,
And watch the soaring hawk there! Life escapes
Merrily thus.

(11,471-3)

This kind of escapism will be repeated on Sordello's
next return to Goito, except that then, instead of ~~finding~~ *finding merriment*
his eyes grow dim (111,60).

Extract from Sordello, Book 11, 545-617

545 Courtèd thus at unawares,
In spite of his pretensions and his cares,
He caught himself shamefully hankering
After the obvious petty joys that spring
From true life, fain relinquish pedestal
550 And condescend with pleasures - one and all
To be renounced, no doubt; for, thus to chain
Himself to single joys and so refrain
From tasting their quintessence, frustrates, sure,
His prime design; each joy must he abjure
Even for love of it.

555 He laughed: what sage
But perishes if from his magic page
He look because, at the first line, a proof
'T was heard salutes him from the cavern roof?
"On! Give yourself, excluding ought beside,
560 "To the day's task; compel your slave provide
"Its utmost at the soonest; turn the leaf
"Thoroughly conned. These lays of yours, in
 brief -
"Cannot men bear, now, something better? - fly
"A pitch beyond this unreal pageantry
565 "Of essences? the period sure has ceased
"For such: present us with ourselves, at least,
"Not portions of ourselves, mere loves and hates
"Made flesh; wait not!"

 Awhile the poet waits
However. The first trial was enough:
570 He left imagining, to try the stuff
That held the imaged thing, and, let it writhe
Never so fiercely, scarce allowed a tithe
To reach the light - his Language. How he
 sought
The cause, conceived a cure, and slow
 re-wrought
575 That language, - welding words into the crude
Mass from the new speech round him, till a rude

Armour was hammered out, in time to be
 Approved beyond the Roman panoply
 Melted to make it, - boots not. This obtained
 580 With some ado, no obstacle remained
 To using it; accordingly he took
 An action with its actors, quite forsook
 Himself to live in each, returned anon
 With the result - a creature, and, by one
 585 And one, proceeded leisurely to equip
 Its limbs in harness of his workmanship.
 "Accomplished! Listen, Mantuans!" Fond essay!
 Piece after piece that armour broke away,
 Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
 590 To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
 As language: thought may take perception's place
 But hardly co-exist in any case,
 Being its mere presentment - of the whole
 By parts, the simultaneous and the sole
 595 By the successive and the many. Lacks
 The crowd perception? painfully it tacks
 Thought to thought, which Sordello, needing
 such,
 Has rent perception into: its to clutch
 And reconstruct - his office to diffuse,
 600 Destroy: as hard, then, to obtain a Muse
 As to become Apollo. "For the rest,
 "E'en if some wondrous vehicle expressed
 "The whole dream, what impertinence in me
 "So to express it, who myself can be
 605 "The dream! nor, on the other hand, are those
 "I sing to, over-likely to suppose
 "A higher than the highest I present
 "Now, which they praise already: be content
 "Both parties, rather - they with the old verse,
 610 "And I with the old praise - far go, fare worse!"
 A few adhering rivets loosed, upsprings
 The angel, sparkles off his mail, which rings
 Whirled from each delicatest limb it warps;
 So might Apollo from the sudden corpse
 615 Of Hyacinth have cast his luckless quoits.
 He set to celebrating the exploits
 Of Montfort o'er the Mountainers.

Sordello has realised some success in his singing, and received much praise from the crowd. However, this praise has come before he was able to digest it properly. This passage shows what happened following this first success when he tries to go beyond what he is capable of.

The unexpected popularity has caught Sordello unaware and he catches himself wishing for the 'obvious petty joys' of 'true life' (11,548-9). Sordello has had 'pretensions' and 'cares' (11,546) to keep himself from such hankerings, but they are not strong enough to prevent such wishes. The word 'pretensions' is telling here; some false emotions have been part of what should prevent his hankering for the petty joys; this suggests that his trying to prevent himself wishing for worldly pleasures has not endowed him with any real superiority. Indeed, we have seen earlier how his dissociation from the world has been based on vanity, rather than actual need of the peace thus provided for imaginative experience (as in Wordsworth for example). However Sordello still feels that he is above worldly things - his wish for pleasure would mean condescending; this is implied in the scathing tone when referring to 'the obvious petty joys' (11,548) and also in the next phrase:

fain relinquish pedestal
And condescend with pleasures
(11,549-50)

Further, and more serious, motivation for refraining from such joys for Sordello is because he would, having them, be in effect chaining himself to them, and so be unable to taste 'their quintessence' (11,553). This would frustrate his main intention. If he truly loves something, he must abstain from it if he is to celebrate its essence in his verse. Sordello is heroic in this sense as well as arrogant.

He is, however, not distressed by this situation; quite the reverse - it makes him buoyant: 'He laughed' (11,555). Now he realises that the wise perish if at their first acknowledgement they stop concentrating on their goals. Sordello appears to

have developed in the lack of importance he attaches to praise; praise is now described as like an echo 'from the cavern roof' (11,558). His sense of proportion has developed far from when he believed in the praise of creatures of his own imagination. Sordello now seems again to be speaking to himself, or imagining an external voice speaking to him, urging himself to proceed, and the images are more generous: "On! Give yourself" (11,559). He is no longer lapping up praise but considering whether people are now ready to bear 'something better' (11,563) from him. His aim is more modest, prepared now to give himself "To the day's task" (11,560). In the 'day's task', his art should provide the most it can as fast as possible. The voice imagined by Sordello sees his art as a 'slave' (11,560), an interesting development, as we do not often see Sordello in control of his language. He sees that the "unreal pageantry/"Of essences" (11,564-5) is not enough any ^{more} and he should present whole people rather than mere portions of them. His early poetry has been, he sees, "mere loves and hates/"Made flesh" (567-8) and he urges himself not to wait before presenting real people.

He does however wait awhile, tired by 'The first trial' (11,569). He leaves imagining to practise the language 'That held the imaged thing' (11,571). However much the technique struggles, and hardly allows even a tenth part to reach the light in his language, Sordello fights on. He goes right back to the roots of the problem and slowly goes about re-working his language, as it were joining his words into the 'crude/Mass from the new speech' he hears round him until he reaches some success with the 'rude/Armour' (11,575-7) hammered out. While the word 'armour' follows here from the image of welding words, it may well be of note that his more successful use of language is termed 'armour'. The implication here is that words may provide protection. The narrator here tells us that it is unnecessary to give detailed information on exactly how Sordello worked out his new technique. Quite simply, it has taken some effort, but, once achieved, there is no obstacle in the way of his using it. The images describing his progress then seem to relate to the fact that Sordello has been methodical in his work with his language. He then

becomes imaginatively engaged with each of his characters; like Keats' chameleon poet he is totally immersed in each:

accordingly he took
An action with its actors, quite forsook
Himself to live in each

(11,581-3)

Having a full 'creature' (11,584) in his imagination, Sordello can now 'equip/Its limbs in harness of his workmanship' (11,585-6), that is, present it with his newly-formed language technique.

This makes him exuberant, eager to share the result with his audience. He exclaims: "Accomplished! Listen, Mantuans!" (11,587). However, his attempt is foolish and certain to fail because whole perceptions cannot be subjected to a product composed *only* of thought - language in this case. As the Oxford Edition puts it, 'Language is too abstract to convey the full complexity of perception and experience' (OE, p.273). Thought may take over from perception but cannot co-exist since it can only present perceptions unsatisfactorily; because language works sequentially it can hardly hope to convey what is perceived all at once. It is not the crowd's perception that is at fault, though Sordello thinks it is. The crowd goes through the painful process of putting the thought together that Sordello 'Has rent perception into' (11,598). The crowd clutches at meaning and tries to reconstruct what Sordello has destroyed by his diffusing of perception. Sordello has attempted the expression of the kind of imagination described by Coleridge in Biographia Literaria: 'It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create' (Chapter XIII, p.167). Unlike Coleridge's ideal poet, Sordello has failed in this attempt.

Sordello now realises the difficulty of becoming a poet; it is as hard as his earlier ambition to become Apollo. His failure here leads to complacency rather than despair. He comforts himself by the rationalisation that it would in fact be 'impertinence' in him to express the 'whole dream' (11,603) even if there were 'some wondrous vehicle' (11,602)

that were able to do so. He himself may be the dream, in the sense of entering the whole vision; this does not imply that it is appropriate to try to express it. Also, and this comment seems more indicative of complacency, Sordello decides that the crowd is not likely to think it possible to imagine anything better than the best he presents already. It is thus as well to be content:

they with the old verse,
"And I with the old praise

(11,609-10)

Sordello throws away his armour of new language, which has been holding down something wonderful, warping as it were the delicate limbs of an angel - Armour of course would be inappropriate on an ethereal being. Words like 'upsprings', 'rings/Whirled' and 'delicatest' (11,611-13) here give a sense of new exuberance.

The next lines (614-7) are odd. It is as though Apollo had cast the quoits from Hyacinth's corpse. Hyacinth had been killed when the jealous Zephyrus had blown Apollo's quoit at his head. Apollo would have thrown the quoit from Hyacinth's body in anger and sorrow. This does not seem appropriate to Sordello's mood of the previous lines, unless we assume that with the energy of a new direction - of celebrating the exploits of Montfort - he also mourns for the beauty he tried to express which is now inaccessible.

Extract from Sordello, Book 11, 655-713

655 Weeks, months, years went by
And lo, Sordello vanished utterly,
Sundered in twain; each spectral part at strife
With each; one jarred against another life;
The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man -
660 Who, fooled no longer, free in fancy ran
Here, there: let slip no opportunities
As pitiful, forsooth, beside the prize
To drop on him some no-time and acquit
His constant faith (the Poet-half's to wit)
665 That waiving any compromise between
No joy and all joy kept the hunger keen
Beyond most methods - of incurring scoff
From the Man-portion - not to be put off
With self-reflectings by the Poet's scheme,
Though ne'er so bright. Who sauntered forth in
670 dream,
Dressed any how, nor waited mystic frames,
Immeasurable gifts, astounding claims,
But just his sorry self? - who yet might be
Sorrier for aught he in reality
675 Achieved, so pinioned Man's the Poet-part,
Fondling, in turn of fancy, verse; the Art
Developing his soul a thousand ways -
Potent, by its assistance, to amaze
The multitude with majesties, convince
680 Each sort of nature that the nature's prince
Accosted it. Language, the makeshift, grew
Into a bravest of expedients, too;
Apollo, seemed it now, perverse had thrown
Quiver and bow away, the lyre alone
Sufficed. While, out of dream, his day's work
685 went
To tune a crazy tenzon or sirvent -
So hampered him the Man-part, thrust to judge
Between the bard and the bard's audience, grudge
A minute's toil that missed its due reward!

690 But the complete Sordello, Man and Bard,
John's cloud-girt angel, this foot on the land,
That on the sea, with, open in his hand,
A bitter-sweetling of a book - was gone.

Then, if internal struggles to be one,
695 Which frittered him incessantly piecemeal,
Referred, ne'er so obliquely, to the real
Intruding Mantuans! ever with some call
To action while he pondered, once for all,
Which looked the easier effort - to pursue
This course, still leap o'er paltry joys, yearn
700 through
The present ill-appreciated stage
Of self-revelment, and compel the age
Know him - or else, forswearing bard-craft,
wake
From out his lethargy and nobly shake
705 Off timid habits of denial, mix
With men, enjoy like men. Ere he could fix
On aught, in rushed the Mantuans; much they
cared
For his perplexity! Thus unprepared,
The obvious if not only shelter lay
710 In deeds, the dull conventions of his day
Prescribed the like of him: why not be glad
'T is settled Palma's minstrel, good or bad,
Submits to this and that established rule?

Sordello has attempted to please the crowd, and now rejects the idea that their recognition is important:

Who were
The Mantuans, after all, that he should care
About their recognition, ay or no?

(11,635-7)

He sees no use in continuing to pretend that the opinion of others is of use to him. No longer concerned with the world, Sordello becomes self-conscious, obsessed with the split in his personality between the 'man' and 'poet' sides of his nature.

As time goes on, Sordello loses any sense of identity: 'Sordello vanished utterly' (11,656) as he is psychologically split in two. Each 'spectral' (11,657) part of him is at odds with the other. This implies that neither part alone is very substantial - each part is 'spectral'. Also ghostly, each part jars against another 'life' (11,658). The two parts are the poet and the man halves of Sordello. The poet-part thwarts the man-part 'hopelessly' (11,659). The man-part is no longer 'fooled' (11,660) by the poet-part. It no longer believes in the great ideas of the poet. Because not deceived any more, the man-part is free to go where he will in fancy, letting no opportunity pass which may benefit him, even if such opportunities appear as pitiful when compared with the ultimate prize to which the idealistic poet aspires. The narrator is doubtful that this prize will drop on Sordello; he says this will happen 'some no-time' (11,663). The poet-half believes that there can be no compromise between all or no-joy, he thinks that this way of life will bring him reward. This idealism is scoffed at by the man-side of Sordello, which is not put off by the poet-half's self-reflection, even though brighter. The person who is magnificent in dreams, able to saunter forth, is, in physical, worldly terms, 'just his sorry self' (11,673). It seems that the poet-part is addressing the man-part here, since there is adverse criticism implied in the 'Dressed any how, nor waited mystic frames' (11,671); the man-part is all too willing to

compromise. This sorry self could become sorrier for anything he actually achieved; the poet-part pins the man-part with this thought. The poet-part cherishes verse above the fancy with which the man-part will be content. Both sides of Sordello's nature are ambitious, though the man-part is content with what the poet-part scorns. The poet-part will not compromise while the man-part will. It is difficult to disentangle the phrases that relate to the man or poet-part in this passage. The effect of this is that we keep in mind the fact that both parts are in one person, and that for Sordello to distinguish between their separate instincts must also require considerable powers of self-analysis.

The poet in Sordello sees how the art of verse develops 'his soul a thousand ways' (11,677), powerful, with the assistance of his soul, to 'amaze/The multitude with majesties' (11,678-9) and convince every kind of person that it has heard the most superior type of all. His makeshift language also grew: 'Into a bravest of expedients' (11,682). The word 'bravest' seems to indicate a hint of bravado. His muse, 'Apollo' (11,683) now seems to have thrown away any weapons for attack, for going further, and the lyre, musicality, seems alone enough. When not inspired in dream, he spends his day's work on conventional but meaningless popular songs:

While, out of dream, his day's work went
To tune a crazy tenzon or sirvent -
(11,685-6)

It is his man-part that has caused this, judging between the poet and his audience, it grudges a 'minute's toil' (11,689) that missed acknowledgement by the crowd. This working for reward is seen by the narrator as hampering to Sordello the poet: 'So hampered him the Man-part' (11,687). The problem for Sordello is not dissimilar from Yeats' dilemma in his 'The Choice':

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work
(The Choice, 1-2)

In the Yeats poem, the two cannot be reconciled, but, in Sordello, it is here implied, that, had the two sides of the protagonist not become antagonistic to each other, there could have been a 'complete Sordello' (11,690), though Sordello's ability to distinguish between , and analyse, the two halves of himself does not give the ability to work at combining them. John of Revelation had been true to what he was meant to do and had been successful though just as complex as Sordello, his inspiration had 'this foot on the land,/That on the sea' (11,691-2). Sordello is not able to be like 'John's cloud-girt angel' (11,691). The angel had told John to eat a book that would be as sweet as honey in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. These contradictory elements became complementary when John prophesied; Sordello is unable to combine the opposed elements in himself.

Sordello's referring to the wishes of the Mantuans makes it even more impossible for him to become whole. His own 'internal struggles' (11,694) to achieve unity in himself made him even less unified in himself. The Mantuans make matters worse, as they are always calling him to action while he is hanging back, pondering all the alternatives. The verbs used here indicate Sordello's indecisiveness; they are all 'strong' definite verbs, tending in too many directions, actual and emotional, to be reconciled: 'pursue... leap...yearn...compel...forswear...shake off...mix...enjoy' (11,699-706). Sordello tries to decide which looks the easiest of these:

to pursue

This course, still leap o'er paltry joys, yearn through
The present ill-appreciated stage
Of self-revelment, and compel the age
Know him - or else, forswearing bard-craft, wake
From out his lethargy and nobly shake
Off timid habits of denial, mix
With men, enjoy like men.

(11,699-706)

All these paths seem mutually exclusive, and before he can

decide, the Mantuans rush in, not at all concerned about his dilemma. Unprepared, his obvious - and probably only - refuge lies in deeds, which are merely of 'the dull conventions of his day' (11,710). The kind of deeds he can perform are those which these 'dull conventions' prescribe^{as} suitable for those like Sordello. Those following such conventions, implies the narrator, are indifferent to his quality:

why not be glad

'T is settled Palma's minstrel, good or bad,
Submits to this and that established rule?

(11,711-13)

His indifferent audience that makes no allowances for his inaction, would be unable to understand the reasons behind his hesitancy, he is still obliged to go on pleasing them.

This reminds us of Browning's own dilemma in the 1830s, as I discussed in the Introduction, of wishing to be a poet. The literary world, mourning the loss of the Romantics, would need a poet of similar authority in order to respect him. At the same time, people were reading more superficial verse, like Mrs Busk, which would indicate to an aspiring poet, an audience like Sordello's, not concerned with much more than well-expressed poetry in a conventional style. In writing Sordello itself, Browning was taking the risk that it might be quite unacceptable to such an audience, and any such fears were justified by the reviews, extracts from which may be found in Appendix 11.

Extract from Sordello, Book 111,1-68

And the font took them: let our laurels lie!
Braid moonfern now with mystic trifoly
Because once more Goito gets, once more,
Sordello to itself! A dream is o'er,
5 And the suspended life begins anew;
Quiet those throbbing temples, then, subdue
That cheek's distortion! Nature's strict embrace,
Putting aside the past, shall soon efface
Its print as well - factitious humours grown
10 Over the true - loves, hatreds not his own -
And turn him pure as some forgotten vest
Woven of painted byssus, silkiest
Tufting the Tyrrhene whelk's pearl-sheeted lip,
Left welter where a trireme let it slip
15 I' the sea, and vexed a satrap; so the stain
O' the world forsakes Sordello, with its pain,
Its pleasure: how the tinct loosening escapes,
Cloud after cloud! Mantua's familiar shapes
Die, fair and foul die, fading as they flit,
20 Men, women, and the pathos and the wit,
Wise speech and foolish, deeds to smile or sigh
For, good, bad, seemly or ignoble, die.
The last face glances through the eglantines,
The last voice murmurs, 'twixt the blossomed
vines,
25 Of Men, of that machine supplied by thought
To compass self-perception with, he sought
By forcing half himself - an insane pulse
Of a god's blood, on clay it could convulse,
Never transmute - on human sights and sounds,
30 To watch the other half with; irksome bounds
It ebbs from to its source, a fountain sealed
Forever. Better sure be unrevealed
Than part revealed: Sordello well or ill
Is finished: then what further use of Will,
35 Point in the prime idea not realized,
An oversight? inordinately prized,
No less, and pampered with enough of each

Delight to prove the whole above its reach.
 "To need become all natures, yet retain
 40 "The law of my own nature - to remain
 "Myself, yet yearn... as if that chestnut, think,
 "Should yearn for this first larch-bloom crisp and
 pink,
 "Or those pale fragrant tears where zephyrs
 stanch
 "March wounds along the fretted pine-tree
 branch!
 "Will and the means to show will, great and
 45 small,
 "Material, spiritual, - abjure them all
 "Save any so distinct, they may be left
 "To amuse, not tempt become! and, thus bereft,
 "Just as I first was fashioned would I be!
 50 "Nor, moon, is it Apollo now, but me
 "Thou visitest to comfort and befriend!
 "Swim thou into my heart, and there an end,
 "Since I possess thee! - nay, thus shut mine eyes
 "And know, quite know, by this heart's fall and
 rise,
 55 "When thou dost bury thee in clouds, and when
 "Out-standest: wherefore practise upon men
 "To make that plainer to myself?"
 Slide here
 Over a sweet and solitary year
 Wasted; or simply notice change in him -
 60 How eyes, once with exploring bright, grew dim
 And satiate with receiving. Some distress
 Was caused, too, by a sort of consciousness
 Under the imbecility, - nought kept
 That down; he slept, but was aware he slept,
 65 So, frustrated: as who brainsick made pact
 Erst with the overhanging cataract
 To deafen him, yet still distinguished plain
 His own blood's measured clicking at his brain.

Sordello has left his problems at Mantua due to all the pressures there and returned to Goito where he thinks he 'shall be king again!' (11,1001). This section describes his reflections on his return. He has thrown away the symbols with which society has recognised him - symbols of his submission to the society, in which he has decided he should not have acted as he did.

Sordello has thrown his scarf from Palma and the crown awarded to him by people at the court into the font at Goito, which accepts them. Sordello thus indicates that the natural surroundings of his first home are more important to him than the recognition of real people, who have, as we have seen, forced him to act against his nature, which has been too divided to withstand pressure from the crowd. A mystic celebration can now take place because Goito has, once more, 'Sordello to itself!' (111,4). Sordello has left a 'dream' (111,4) among real people to go to mysticism amid plants. Perhaps the phrase that Goito 'gets, ...Sordello to itself' is a comment on the exclusiveness of nature; when Sordello is again immersed in it, his time among men appears no more than 'a dream'. He is back to the 'life' that has been 'suspended' (111,5). Living in society has had abnormal, stressful effects on Sordello, to make his temples throb and to distort his cheek. Now he can return to calm; indeed it is as though 'Nature's strict embrace' (111.7) ensures this and orders it - 'Quiet those throbbing temples' (111,6) is in the imperative. Here Nature is seen as akin to Wordsworth's image of Nature in The Prelude - a disciplining force for the individual. The embrace of Nature, in putting aside the past, will soon rid Sordello of the marks put on him in the past. It will purify him from the 'factitious humours' (111,9) which have grown over his own pure ones and strong emotions he has taken from others: 'loves, hatreds not his own' (111.10). The materials of the 'forgotten vest' (111,11) to which Sordello is compared may be of the purest and finest but also perhaps gives a sense of too much luxury:

Woven of painted byssus, silkiest

Tufting the Tyrrhene whelk's pearl-sheeted lip

(111,12-13)

The vest may be pure, but it has belonged to a 'satrap' (111,15), governor of an ancient kingdom, and this perhaps adds a suggestion that the narrator is very aware Sordello is not part of a viable 'modern' world.

Whether or not there is a criticism of escapism, we are told for certain that:

the stain
O' the world forsakes Sordello, with its pain,
Its pleasure

(111,15-17)

The description of its leaving:

how the tinct loosening escapes,
Cloud after cloud!

(111,17-18)

implies how falsely-lined the effect of the 'world' has been on Sordello; it is as though the society in which he has been living has clouded his vision by surface colour only. Quite of what this surface has been composed is indefinite, cloudy, insubstantial, even as it leaves him. Now 'Mantua's familiar shapes' (111,18) die to Sordello, becoming less distinct to him as they leave his mind, even though they encompass so many emotions and types:

fair and foul die, fading as they flit,
Men, women, and the pathos and the wit,
Wise speech and foolish, deeds to smile or sigh
For, good, bad, seemly or ignoble, die.

(111,19-22)

It sounds like a list of all types to be consumed in a dance of death. All these shapes die to Sordello; his chief interest now is in the flowers of Goito and it is through these that he hears and sees the last of the Mantuans in his imagination - there is something a little nostalgic in the rhythm and images here implying Sordello's thoughts of men really are in the

past:

The last face glances through the eglantines,
The last voice murmurs, 'twixt the blossomed
vines,
Of Men

(111,23-5)

The words 'Of Men' refer both to the preceding two lines and to 'he sought' of line 26. In order to find out about men and his language, 'that machine supplied by thought/ To compass self-perception with' (111,25-6), he has tried to force half of himself on 'clay' (111,28) his 'insane pulse...could convulse,/Never transmute' (111,27-9). The suggestion is that divine poetry can never be fully incarnate in a mortal poet. Sordello tries to force himself on 'clay' but can only 'convulse' it; the emphasis is on the strain and struggle involved for scant effect; a real god may change clay into mankind. The one half of Sordello's self he has tried to force 'on human sights and sounds' (111,29). If he had managed this, he would have aimed to watch his other half from this position amid the human sights and sounds. The human life is 'clay' which so 'insane' a pulse could convulse but never change. The 'irksome bounds' (111,30) are perhaps the limits to which Sordello can stretch his language to describe the perceptions of one half of himself. These could also refer to the bounds of his effect on others. It seems unclear to what the 'It' of line 31 refers:

irksome bounds

It ebbs from to its source, a fountain sealed
Forever.

(111,30-32)

It seems most likely that 'It' refers to his self. It retreats from the 'irksome bounds' back to where it is safe, but also has as little potential as a fountain which is sealed forever. The idea of a fountain suggests endless fertility and freshness, so as it is sealed forever, the suggestion is of enormous waste.

Sordello has decided it is better not to be revealed at all 'Than part revealed' (111,33). Again, we may see Sordello's complacency when he fails: 'Sordello well or ill/Is finished' (111,33-4). There seems to be no further use for his will nor any further point in his 'prime idea' (111,35) which has not been realized. His 'prime idea', as we have seen, was to move mankind through simply using his will. Despite his missing the idea previously that his will could fail, it was 'inordinately prized,/No less' (111,36-7) and given enough of each pleasure to indicate that the whole was beyond him:

pampered with enough of each
Delight to prove the whole above its reach.
(111,37-8)

The word 'pampered' indicates that it has been a luxury for Sordello to experience these delights. He has gained enough of each delight for which he has aimed to indicate that the whole was beyond him. This idea is made emphatic by the word 'pampered'. He has been spoilt in getting as far as he has; he has had part of the delight given to him rather than having obtained it for himself through any act of will. So, no act of his will would be able to take him further. In thinking over it, Sordello recognises that he has wanted to combine in himself the chameleon poet who can enter imaginatively into other beings, and the other kind of poet who retains his own character. This desire of Sordello's he has expressed as a need: '"To need become' (111,39). This further indicates the lack of compromise in his character; he has felt the need for things he now compares with unrealistic yearnings - that of a tree for flowers inappropriate to itself. The lines are lovely, but objectively it is misplaced for a chestnut to yearn for the flowers of the larch or the pine:

as if that chestnut, think,
"Should yearn for this first larch-bloom crisp and
pink,
"Or those pale fragrant tears where zephyrs stanch
"March wounds along the fretted pine-tree branch!

Because Sordello is unable to combine two very different sorts of nature in himself, he is determined to renounce

"Will and the means to show will, great and small,
"Material, spiritual

(111,45-6)

Sordello will now show his will in attempts which are so distinct they may be kept to amuse him, rather than to lure him to try anything beyond that. Bereft of his will (which has caused him frustration, but, we may see how it has also caused his escape back to Goito from the world of men where he has been frustrated) he wishes himself as he was when he 'first was fashioned' (111,49). He sees himself as reverting to a time before 'Apollo' time (when he tried to befriend other objects like the statues) and sees the moon as comforting him in his own person. Instead of sending out his soul to other beings, he now asks the moon to swim into his heart. His light no longer goes out to others (as for example in 1,505) but instead he wants to accept the moon's light passively, feeling that he possesses it. Introverted dreaming is now enough for Sordello; he wants to be able to shut his eyes - or, rather, have the moon to shut them - and imagine what the moon is doing from his heart-beat. It now seems pointless to practise describing this feeling to men in order to make it plainer to himself; it is already plain to him.

The effect of this introversion is a 'Wasted' (111,59) year. Although it is 'sweet' (111,58) there is something cloying about the image of Sordello's eyes growing 'dim/And satiate with receiving.' (111,60-61). We may be reminded of the image of Sordello and Palma together in Ferrara when his being 'saturate with her' (1,336) leads to his being charged with energy:

he springs up, glad to breathe,
Above the cunning element

(1,338-9)

There is a contrast too with the descriptions of Sordello's

earlier life, when, apparently as passive, he was in fact blossoming:

a footfall there
Suffices to upturn to the warm air
Half-germinating spices; mere decay
Produces richer life; and day by day
New pollen on the lily-petal grows,
And still more labyrinthine buds the rose.

(1,471-6)

These were the days when his eyes were still bright 'with exploring' (111,60), but now receiving Goito's wealth has a dulling effect, like too much perfect 'sameness' in Tennyson's 'Lotus Eaters'. Under his 'imbecility' (111,63) however, he is distressed since nothing can keep down 'a sort of consciousness' (111,62). His state is similar too to that described in Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' but Sordello has become more consciously dejected perhaps since he has, as it were, first made a 'pact' (111,65) with the cataract 'To deafen him' (111,67). Despite this pact, he cannot escape his oppression by his self-consciousness; the very rhythm of the second line here indicates how tortured he is:

[he] still distinguished plain
His own blood's measured clicking at his brain.

(111,67-8)

Extract from Sordello, Book 111,140-204

140 "No more lifes, deaths, loves, hatreds, peaces,
wars!
"Ah, fragments of a whole ordained to be,
"Points in the life I waited! what are ye
"But roundels of a ladder which appeared
"Awhile the very platform it was reared
145 "To lift me on? - that happiness I find
"Proofs of my faith in, even in the blind
"Instinct which bade forego you all unless
"Ye led me past yourselves. Ay, happiness
"Awaited me; the way life should be used
150 "Was to acquire, and deeds like you conduced
"To teach it by a self-revealment, deemed
"Life's very use, so long! Whatever seemed
"Progress to that, was pleasure; aught that stayed
"My reaching it - no pleasure. I have laid
155 "The ladder down; I climb not; still, aloft
"The platform stretches! Blissess strong and soft,
"I dared not entertain, elude me; yet
"Never of what they promised could I get
"A glimpse till now! The common sort, the
crowd,
160 "Exist, perceive; with Being are endowed,
"However slight, distinct from what they See,
"However bounded; Happiness must be,
"To feed the first by gleanings from the last,
"Attain its qualities, and slow or fast
"Become what they behold; such
165 peace-in-strife,
"By transmutation, is the Use of Life,
"The Alien turning Native to the soul
"Or body - which instructs me; I am whole
"There and demand a Palma; had the world
170 "Been from my soul to a like distance hurled,
"'T were Happiness to make it one with me:
"Whereas I must, ere I begin to Be,
"Include a world, in flesh, I comprehend

"In spirit now; and this done, what's to blend
175 "With? Nought is Alien in the world - my Will
"Owns all already; yet can turn it - still
"Less - Native, since my Means to correspond
"With Will are so unworthy, 't was my bond
"To tread the very joys that tantalize
180 "Most now, into a grave, never to rise.
"I die then! Will the rest agree to die?
"Next Age or no? Shall its Sordello try
"Clue after clue, and catch at last the clue
"I miss? - that's underneath my finger too,
"Twice, thrice a day, perhaps, - some yearning
185 traced
"Deeper, some petty consequence embraced
"Closer! Why fled I Mantua, then? -
 complained
"So much my Will was fettered, yet remained
"Content within a tether half the range
190 "I could assign it? - able to exchange
"My ignorance (I felt) for knowledge, and
"Idle because I could thus understand -
"Could e'en have penetrated to its core
"Our mortal mystery, yet - fool - forbore,
195 "Preferred elaborating in the dark
"My casual stuff, by any wretched spark
"Born of my predecessors, though one stroke
"Of mine had brought the flame forth! Mantua's
 yoke,
"My minstrel's-trade, was to behold
 mankind, -
200 "My own concern was just to bring my mind
"Behold, just extricate, for my acquist,
"Each object suffered stifle in the mist
"Which hazard, custom, blindness interpose
"Betwixt things and myself."

Sordello has been musing on his past, on what he has lost in terms of human love and beauty, in a tender lyrical passage:

"Not any strollings now at even-close
"Down the field-path, Sordello! by thorn-rows
"Alive with lamp-flies, swimming spots of fire
"And dew, outlining the black cypress' spire
"She waits you at, Elys, who heard you first
"Woo her, the snow-month through, but ere she durst
"Answer 't was April. Linden-flower-time-long
"Her eyes were on the ground . . . "

(111,103-10)

He also contemplates what he has lost in terms of exploratory excitement. Now he has no more of the business society imposes on man:

"No more lifes, deaths, loves, hatreds, peaces, wars!

(111,140)

All these are mere fragments in a whole he feels had been marked out. They are merely 'roundels of a ladder' (111,143) which for a while appeared to be the point to which they in fact led. The 'very platform' is presumably 'that happiness' which Sordello can find '"Proofs of [his] faith in' (111,144-6). These proofs are found even in the 'blind/"Instinct' (111,146-7) which said he should give up the business or company of all others unless it led to something beyond.

In the past he believes happiness awaited him; it seemed then that life should be used to acquire (here it is uncertain whether he means to acquire happiness, or knowledge, or steps towards completeness though all three are by no means mutually exclusive). The 'deeds' (111,150) like the points on a ladder on the way to progress tried to teach Sordello how to live by giving him 'self-revelment' (111,151) which he assumed was '"Life's very use, so long!' (111,152). Whatever seemed progress towards this self-knowledge 'was pleasure' (111,153) and whatever impeded his progress in this

direction was the reverse.

Sordello has now laid this particular path aside, but realises that the 'platform' (111,156) for which he had been striving is still 'aloft' (111,155). 'Blisses' (111,156) he had not even dared to consider the thought of when in pursuit of his aims, he sees as eluding him, but recognises that he has not previously even had a glimpse, unlike now, 'of what they promised' (111,158).

Sordello changes abruptly from his new revelation of his glimpses of the bliss possible to considering 'The common sort, the crowd' (111,159). In this abrupt change we may see an unwillingness to contemplate what could lead to sorrow. There is a hint that he now recognises his path is not so dissimilar from the crowd's even though he still generalizes when referring to them as 'The common sort'. He recognises that those in the crowd are able to perceive that their consciousness of their own existence is distinct from what they see. The use of capitals for 'Being' and 'See' (111,160-61) seems to indicate that Sordello is beginning to take the perceptions of others more seriously, even though he still sees them as blinkered; what they see is 'bounded' (111,162). He goes on to say that for those people, happiness must consist in feeding their being from what they can glean from their sight - or perceptions. The word 'gleanings' (111,163) shows that Sordello still regards others as limited in their perceptions. Having gained from their perceptions, these people are aiming to '"Become what they behold' (111,165). This process may be stressful but leads to peace - he describes it as 'peace-in-strife' (111,165) and it is, for him, 'the Use of Life' (111,166). Things alien should become intrinsic, 'Native' to 'the soul/"Or body' (111,167-8). People should live in a sense, then, through their accepting of others through a sort of chameleon process. The regularity in the rhythm of these lines indicates a contemplativeness in Sordello, which has been absent from his self-conscious cluttered thoughts about the divisions in himself for instance. In turning to look objectively at others, he seems capable of clearer thought.

gives it added importance, as if he imagines another Golden Age approaching - as indeed is appropriate for a poet at the beginning of the Renaissance. Sordello wonders if his equivalent of the next age will try "Clue after clue" (111,183) to fulfilment and at last find the clue he, Sordello, has missed. Sordello realises that he himself has the potential to find this clue; it's 'underneath [his] finger too' (111,184). It might be found on one of the occasions that occur two or three times a day - when he traces some yearning deeper or becomes closer to 'some petty consequence' (111,186).

This being the case, he asks himself why he fled Mantua, complaining his will was restrained, when in fact he was "Content" or complacent within a (self-imposed) 'tether' (111,189) that kept his will within half the range he could have given it. Then, in Mantua, he was, he felt, able to gain knowledge instead of ignorance. But he was in fact idle 'because [he] could thus understand' (111,192) - presumably what he could understand was his potential for knowledge, the fact that he:

"Could e'en have penetrated to its core
"Our mortal mystery

(111,193-4)

However he did not attempt this, and recognises now his foolishness in preferring:

elaborating in the dark
"[His] casual stuff

(111,195-6)

We may be reminded of the description of the castle at Goito, like a captured creature, with its beauty contained by bounds that do not concern it. Sordello throughout the poem becomes caught in self-imposed, and society-imposed, situations from which he does not recognise the need to escape until too late. As we have seen earlier, the man-part and poet-part of him were in conflict during the phase to which he now looks back with self-reproach, but he has no real insight into

what exactly went wrong. Sordello's 'casual stuff' derived from any 'wretched spark' (111,196) produced by his predecessors, and he followed them despite the fact that he now feels 'one stroke' (111,197) of his would have produced real, inspired poetry, 'brought the flame forth!' (111,198).

Under the 'yoke' of being in Mantua with the 'minstrel's-trade' (111,198-9) he was compelled to observe people, while his own concern had been to perceive clearly, for his own advantage, each object through the mist of 'hazard, custom, blindness' (111,203). By seeing each object clearly, he would in a sense have been acquiring it. But in watching people the way required in Mantua, he was still in the mist between himself and the essence of real things.

Notes

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, p.167
2. It is possible that T.S. Eliot had these lines in mind when he wrote in 'Gerontion': 'History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors' (Gerontion,1,34).
3. Isobel Armstrong, 'Browning and the 'Grotesque' Style', in The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, pp100-101.
4. The Oxford Edition sorts out these lines extremely well (see p.262).

CONCLUSION

Through discussing Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello I have attempted to indicate some of the ways in which Browning developed as a poet in the 1830s. His presentation of character and theme became more sophisticated as he explored the implications of Romantic ideals of the poet in increasingly real worlds. In Sordello, his attempts at rendering the full complexity of the life of a poet (aware of his own dilemmas and confronting a world of turmoil) resulted in extremely complex language. Sordello presented a huge challenge to Browning's contemporaries in terms of theme and complexity, and critics nowadays are still trying to come to terms with it.

In these three poems, self-consciousness is associated with failure. It may result from it, as in Pauline, where the narrator endlessly seeks to come to terms with his past, or cause it, as in Sordello, where the protagonist's constant self-analysis renders him incapable of any action at all. Imaginative creativity results from unselfconscious thought, in a way similar to the Romantic ideal of spontaneity in composition. In Wordsworth such spontaneity is God-given; in Browning it seems to come from a freeing of the consciousness of the individual. This idea is seen even more forcefully in Browning's next long poem, Pippa Passes, in which the heroine's free singing produces change for the better in those who hear her. In all these poems, it is not enough for the poet to sing to himself in solitude; Browning, while retaining the Romantic idea of spontaneity being associated with creativity, has developed a Victorian sensibility; what is intrinsically beautiful must also be of use, of moral worth.

We may see in these poems Browning's interest in the monologue, to be developed so successfully in Men and Women and Dramatis Personae. Pauline is one continuous monologue, although rambling, which is perhaps psychologically justified,

with little real awareness of audience. In Paracelsus, dialogue is introduced, but it is very formal, while Sordello shows a new ability to portray a character speaking and being aware of his listeners at the same time. This is seen not only in Sordello's interactions with others, but also in the presentation of the whole poem by the narrator. He is akin to the narrators of Dramatis Personae in his attempted manipulation of his audience, his hesitancy, his putting of different viewpoints, playing with our responses.

None of these poems was popular when Browning wrote them, and their difficulty may still deter their potential readers. Once some of this difficulty is overcome, they are found to contain much intrinsic poetic and psychological interest. In the way Browning deals with issues like poetic status, his poems mark a phase in the transition from Romantic to Victorian thought.

APPENDIX 1: The Historical Background of Sordello

Sordello opens at a period of long-continued feud between the parties of Guelfs (pro-Pope) and Ghibellins (pro-Emperor). This rivalry had begun when Charlemagne had been made Holy Roman Emperor - the extent of the powers due to such a position being unclear from the start. At the time of Sordello (late 12th century), the central figures in the feud (based in Northern Italy) were Azzo d'Este and Richard of Saint Boniface, the Guelf leaders, who opposed the Ghibellins Taurello Salinguerra and Ecelin of the Romano family (Sordello, I, 100-106).

Salinguerra had a personal grievance against Azzo d'Este quite apart from the party one. I quote Holmes' succinct account: 'In Ferrara, the Ghibelline Torelli [Salinguerra's family] share with the Guelf Adelardi control of the city.... Marchesalla... [Sordello, IV, 471-528] de Adelardi dies in 1184, leaving his daughter, Linguetta, sole heiress to the Adelardi possessions. Intrigue is on foot to marry young Taurello (the Taurello of the poem) to Linguetta, thus joining the two opposing parties, with the result, peace. But a party of Ravennese Guelfs, alarmed at the accession of power this would bring to the Ghibellins, capture Linguetta and give her to the Este family, head of the Guelfs in Lombardy and Venezia. Azzo d'Este marries her [Salinguerra having been cunningly persuaded to go hunting - so he was out of the city]. The Ferranese decide it is hopeless to go contrary to the great Este family; indeed, to welcome this House as ruler of Ferrara would silence all opposition and bring peace to the strife-weary city. Young Salinguerra the prospective bridegroom, disgusted at the treachery, goes to the court of Heinrich in Sicily, marries Retrude, daughter of Heinrich and Constance, returning some time later as emissary of the emperor to the Ghibelline leaders in Northern Italy.

Whereas Salinguerra's power came mostly from this association, the Romano family rose to power through several generations (Sordello, I, 240-278). The Ecelin of the poem was descended from an obscure Saxon scout - Arpo or Yoland - who came to Lombardy in extreme poverty as a follower of Conrad II (Sordello, III, 450) in 1036, says Holmes.

Therefore, when the Romano house was set up, the name was mocked at first, but the jeering laughter changed to sadness when Ecelin filled his lands with castles in opposition to the Guelfs. This Ecelin 'led in/A son as cruel' (Sordello,1,275) the Ecelin Romano of the poem, who had sons and daughters by many wives.

Agnes d'Este was the first of these wives and the mother of the Palma of the poem (Sordello,1,941-2). Thus Palma, with her close kinship with both Guelf and Ghibelline leaders, was highly significant as a political symbol. The last wife of Ecelin was Adelaide, the Tuscan, who was reputed to have the powers of a witch. We do not learn any basis for this in the poem other than the mention of her horoscope (Sordello,111,373), but we do learn that she was the driving force behind her husband, persuading him to continue with the Ghibelline cause whenever doubts troubled him (Sordello,111,359-371). When she died suddenly, Ecelin weakened completely and went off to the convent at Oliero (Sordello,111,423-7 & 1,290-1), at a critical time for the Ghibellines, occupied as they were with the siege of Ferrara (to be dealt with later). In the context of this poem, Adelaide's most significant act was her disguising of Sordello's lineage (Sordello,V,748 seq) When the Ghibellines were expelled from Vicenza, El Corte, a poor archer, saved Retrude, Salinguerra's wife, with her newly-born son, and Adelaide with her's. Retrude died peacefully and Adelaide brought Retrude's son up as her page, pretending that he, Sordello, was the child of El Corte. Until her death Adelaide did not reveal to anyone that Salinguerra's son lived (Sordello,V,805-8). She was aware that if Salinguerra had known, he might have decided against his subservience to Ecelin, and for his son's sake become more personally ambitious (Sordello,V,805-8). Indeed when the Emperor Heinrich first gave Salinguerra his support, he had by no means intended him to place himself in the service of another.'

However Salinguerra had not been keen to take leadership on himself. Directly after his marriage to Retrude, Salinguerra went to the aid of Ecelin with the intention

of restoring him 'the Ghibellin's late Head' with the help of the kaiser (Sordello,1V,535-590). Ecelin was at the time Podestà in Vicenza. Azzo d'Este, hearing of this and fearing Salinguerra's vengeance, 'expelled both plotters' (Sordello,1V,542) but the Guelf party was premature in its triumph. Despite being turned out (and, as we have seen, losing Retrude and, apparently, his son), Salinguerra left his enemies 'the worst/O' the fray' (Sordello,1V,548). The result of his personal loss was however striking; from this time onwards Salinguerra lost personal ambition and estranged his real nature so much 'That in Romano sought he wife and child' (Sordello,1V,556). While Adelaide pushed Ecelin on to gain control of Lombardy with Salinguerra's aid, the kaiser, Heinrich, was puzzled at the fact that his son-in-law was screening himself behind Ecelin. Other leaders were confined too; Philip [Heinrich's brother and Viceroy in Tuscany - Ohio Ed.] tried in vain to persuade Salinguerra to take a new, stately bride and Otho wondered how people could not realise who was the right man. When Salinguerra was absent, Ecelin's weakness was clear (Sordello,1V,640-653); for example, he would make mad assaults on Azzo in a way his previous experience should have warned him against or he would cringe for peace 'At price of some past gain' (Sordello,1V,649). Adelaide had held the weakening Ecelin together, but, as I have mentioned, he went off to be a monk at her death.

Before doing so he arranged marriages between Guelfs and Ghibellins, in the hope of causing peace (Sordello,11,882-905). These were to be between Azzo's sister Beatrix and Alberic, Ecelin's son, and Richard's Giglia and Ecelin, son of the monk-to-be. Palma, Ecelin's eldest daughter, was to be betrothed to Richard himself. On receiving Ecelin's letter informing him of these arrangements, Salinguerra was angry and startled. He hastened to confront Ecelin, who anxiously claimed to have been pressurized by the Guelfs - but also reassured Salinguerra that Palma was in fact still at Goito.

Ecelin had retired to the convent before the siege of

Ferrara, the event with which Sordello opens (Sordello,1,127-186). In the course of the poem, we learn something of the background to this event. Salinguerra, supposedly in control in Ferrara, was in fact at a disadvantage. With Ecelin away, he had asked for the kaiser's help in counteracting the Lombard League, the fifteen North Italian cities which were pro-Pope. As the League strengthened, Salinguerra was powerless to act until his powerful ally arrived. So, the Guelfs were able to re-build their houses while the streets were full of powerless Ghibellines. Salinguerra then decided that, as his presence was 'judged the only bar/To permanent tranquillity' (Sordello,1,151), he would leave to be Podestà in Padua. Immediately he left, the Guelfs wrecked havoc in Ferrara - and Salinguerra returned a week later to take revenge for this. After great bloodshed, he ruled Ferrara alone. Azzo however, who had fled at Salinguerra's return, came back with Richard and laid siege to Ferrara - until Salinguerra called a parley and Richard entered the town. However on entering it, he encountered a 'peril unaware' (Sordello,1,107) and was captured, 'taken with his own intrigue' (Sordello,1,109).

When Ecelin retired from fighting, Salinguerra told Palma that it was now up to her whether or not the house of Romano flourished (Sordello,111,479-487). The kaiser's help, he told her, would not be foregone 'If Palma dare pursue what Ecelo [Ecelin 1]/Commenced, but Ecelin desists from' (Sordello,111,486). At her death-bed, Adelaide had revealed to Palma that Sordello was Salinguerra's son (Sordello,V,748 seq.). In the emergency at Ferrara - that Salinguerra was about to see Guelf ambassadors asking for Richard's ransom - Palma decided to take Sordello to his father and reveal their kinship. This news initially caused Salinguerra to make new plans in which he expected Sordello's assistance. The shock of the revelation, together with Sordello's feeling that his sympathies were if anything pro-Guelf, was largely the cause of Sordello's death.

Following this, the narrator loses much of his interest

in the historical events (Sordello,V1,633 seq.), but we do hear that Salinguerra's attempts at peace - making prospered in the end and 'The upshot, sure,/Was peace' (Sordello,V1,639-640). However, when Salinguerra was near complete personal success, he married Sofia (Sordello,V1,660), youngest of Ecelin's daughters in order to keep 'safe the road/From Germany direct to Lombardy/For Friedrich' (Sordello,V1,656) and thus 'Was sucked into Romano' (Sordello,V1,673). Sofia bore him a foolish son who died before him (Sordello,V1,678). When Ecelin the monk died, his son, Ecelin III, decided he had not been ambitious enough - so 'Stepped/Then its new lord on Lombardy.' (Sordello,V1,695). Just as Ecelin and his brother Alberic were closing with Salinguerra (Sordello,V1,695 seq.), news came that in Verona the people were turning against their Marquis [Azzo]. Ecelin quickly went there and found overwhelming support for himself. And, when Friedrich came to Lombardy, Salinguerra was put still further from public notice. The following year, the Ghibellines took over Vicenza, and, when two or three hundred Guelfs set themselves up against Alberic, Ecelin quelled them easily. As the years went on, Salinguerra became a 'mere showy turbulent soldier' (Sordello,V1,718) and when he carelessly meddled with Venice's navy, he was captured fraudulently in Ferrara and then kept in Venice until his death (Sordello,V1,745 seq.). Meanwhile, Alberic and Ecelin 'plagued the world' (Sordello,V1,771). As a result, the Lombards banded together, under the guise of crusaders - and saved Milan from Ecelin, who died after his attack on that city (Sordello,V1,771-781). Alberic was killed horribly after him by his captors 'in Valley Rù/By San Zenon' (Sordello,V1,776).

When all those in any way connected with him were dead, those who recorded Sordello's life set him up 'For just the god he never could become' (Sordello,V1,827) and praised him as 'Knight, Bard, Gallant' (Sordello,V1,828), changing and elaborating the story of his life.

APPENDIX 2: Extracts from early reviews of Sordello

Early reviewers of Sordello were disappointed by the poem.

The Athenaeum, May 30th, 1840, pp431-2

If she [Browning's muse] would be appreciated by understandings of this earth, she must keep somewhere or other on this side of the clouds.

The Monthly Chronicle, May, 1840, v. pp476-8

We opened Sordello... with the most pleasurable anticipations and closed it with the most painful disappointment.... Mr Browning seems to have forgotten that the medium of art must ever be the beautiful.

The Spectator, March 14th, 1840, xiii. p.257

Whatever may be the poetical spirit of Mr Browning, it is so overlaid in Sordello by digression, affectation, obscurity, and all the faults that spring, it would seem, from crudity of plan and a self-opinion which will neither cull thoughts nor revise composition, that the reader - at least a reader of our stamp - turns away.

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