CHAPTER I

PAULINE

TRADITIONALLY PAULINE HAS BEEN Categorized as lyrical and subjective, “thoroughly autobiographical” to the extent that “Browning is the speaker, hardly disguised at all” (DeVane, Handbook, p. 42). Recent criticism has tended to veer in the opposite direction and hold that the poem is dramatic and impersonal, representing “the interior life of a character, not that of the poet himself.” In my opinion both views, though contradictory, are valid. To explain the paradox, let me begin with some thoughts on the genesis and composition of the poem.

In all likelihood Browning had been thinking of a confessional poem for some time, probably a lyrical narrative in the manner of Shelley’s Alastor. It was to be the means by which the young man could trace his own development imaginatively and so view his past, which he seems to have regarded guiltily, with some degree of objectivity. As a genre the lyric confession was fraught with danger: first, he might reveal too much of himself, and second, and probably more importantly, he might not gain sufficient distance from his putative speaker or narrator. Then one evening in the autumn of 1832 Browning went to the theater to see Edmund Kean as Richard III. Kean had, as everyone knew, fallen on hard times—alcoholic and tuberculous, he was a shadow of his former self—but he somehow managed to get a grip on himself and hide his infirmities long enough to give a captivating performance as Shakespeare’s hero. As Browning walked home after the play, he marveled that such weakness could display such power—by playing a role. The answer dawned on him how he could accomplish the poem that had been lurking unformed in his mind: “I will tell / My state as though ’twere none of mine” (585–86). He would play the role of an unnamed speaker of a dramatic confession addressed to a woman called Pauline. Between 22 October 1832, the night on which the work was conceived and dated at the end, and January 1833, the date affixed to the
epigraph, he wrote the poem—as he said, “on one leg” (Orr, Life, p. 55). It was published anonymously, at his aunt’s expense, in March 1833 as Pauline; A Fragment of a Confession.

From its inception the poem involved a concept of irony, though probably at the beginning Browning did not clearly understand the extent to which he was to engage in an ironic exercise. The consciousness of the distinction between an empirical self and a separated self necessitates the mediation of language, a dédoublement, as Baudelaire called it in his essay “De l’essence du rire,” accomplished only by the linguistic process of signs. That is why Pauline, which Browning in a note to the 1888 edition labeled the “first of my performances,” is cast as an auricular confession, why his separated, aesthetic self speaks his “sad confession first” before he can find “pardon” (25–26): it is an attempt to gain self-knowledge and self-definition, showing in his aesthetic self some of what he is and much of what he perhaps wishes not to be. His words may be poisonous, as the epigraph from Agrippa indicates, but until he speaks them “it were vain / To hope to sing” (16–17). Urged into song by Pauline, who is to a certain extent identifiable with the empirical self, the aesthetic self will tell not of “truth and love” (87) but of “struggling aims” (811) and “all the wandering and all the weakness” (125–26). The “shame” of his thoughts, it turns out, is that they have not hitherto been allowed issue. But if he (or his author) had not repressed them, then of course there could be no song. Now, however, he must “cast away restraint” (41) because “nursed up energies . . . will prey” (481–82). In giving voice to his guilty thoughts, the “I” believes he has control over them and can “look up and be what I had been” (73–74). As we shall see, this end is delusory, totally at variance with the motto from Marot, which (in translation) tells, “I am no longer that which I was nor will ever know how to be again.” The poem is a record of the growing disjunction between the aesthetic self and the empirical self, which will “be the first to deny all, and despise / This verse, and these intents which seem so fair” (991–92).

The sense of playing a role in a world constituted out of lan-
guage from a script not of his own devising involves the speaker in a kind of irony, for he knows that he has only the freedom allotted to an actor on the stage. He recognizes that his "words are wild and weak" (904) and that only provisionally is he "won by a word" (237). Yet he is not cast into utter oblivion because the playwright who is the empirical self may redeem a dark mood by "some little word" that will "light it up again" (1011) and call him once more into play. The sense of dependence of the aesthetic self on the empirical self serves throughout to underscore the ironic view of the poem.

The drama in which Browning engages his dramatis persona takes place in the arena where souls are formed. "Je crois que dans ce qui suit," says Pauline, in a note, which is the only time she speaks in propria persona, "il fait allusion à un certain examen qu'il fit autrefois de l'ame ou plutôt de son ame, pour découvrir la suite des objets auxquels il lui serait possible d'atteindre." Browning shows that we come into the world as "selves" and that we become "souls" as we establish relations with the world external to self. The pheonomenal world is thus what Keats called a "vale of soul-making." The more we partake of exterior reality, the greater soul we become.

Soul-making, however, involves us in a moral problem. For the self is restless and aggressive in its attempts to increase the soul's wealth. As it encounters the not-self, it may be overcome and thus live only as a reflection of the object encountered; or it may attempt to absorb the not-self into its own orbit of value, thereby robbing the not-self of its freedom and distinctiveness. In the case of human encounter, the will of the one violates the will of the other. Considered morally, action of this sort must be condemned. Yet if the self does not engage in such activity, the soul can never grow; which is to say, the self can never be a soul—a moral entity—unless it engage in immoral conduct. It is a paradoxical situation, the self being damned if it does, damned if it doesn't. The dialectic of self and other is the basic theme of Pauline, and the ironies that it entails are heavily informative of the early verse.

In his first published poem, Browning vicariously seeks self-definition by examining the soul in its relation to poetry, love, and religion. The emphasis is mainly on the artistic aspect of
his development, but, at least by implication, he is also con­
cerned to show that his aspirations to be a new and distinctive
kind of poet can come to fruition only if he has what in the
*Essay on Shelley* is called “an adequate instrumentality”—that
is, a developed moral and religious soul. He has his dramatic
persona begin with childhood, when he shared the religious
and cultural beliefs of his elders. Then restraints and imitation
are cast aside; “a change was coming on, / the past was
breaking / Before the coming, and like fever worked” (394—
96). This was a time when “schemes and systems went and
came” (399). He seeks out “some one / To be my own,” and
his choice fell not so much on a scheme or system as a
man—the Sun-treader, Shelley. In Browning’s own life this was
a period of emotional turmoil when, says his earliest authorita­tive biographer, he “set the judgments of those about him at
defiance and gratuitously proclaimed himself everything that
he was, and some things that he was not” (Orr, *Life*, pp. 45—
46).8

What attracted the speaker to the Sun-treader and Browning
to Shelley was the older poet’s exquisite lyricism. Before he
encountered the Sun-treader, the speaker had been much given
to the lyric mode, his verse a kind of effusion indifferent to
verbal meaning: “I sang, as I in dream have seen, / Music wait
on a lyrist for some thought, / Yet singing to herself until it
came” (377–79). He is first caught by “passion’s melodies” in
the Sun-treader’s verse and attempts “to gather every breath­
ing of his songs.” But then he notices that “woven with them
there were words, which seemed / A key to a new world”
(410–14), a beautiful idealism, both political and philosophi­
cal. For the first time it occurs to him forcefully that the lyric
strain can be set to serve a prophetic purpose.

The Romantic poets, and Shelley especially, believed that
the physical world is in essence like the spiritual world, phe­
nomena being veiled shows of the noumena behind. It is possi­
bale, however, to discern appearances as signs or symbols of the
spiritual realm. He who can read this language intermediate
between the actual and the ideal is a seer. He who not only
sees but reveals what he sees is a bard. Thus Shelley offers his
work as the record, in the complex language of analogies and
symbols, of the authentic meeting of his mind with the universal mind, what he calls the unseen Power.\(^9\)

To the "I" of \textit{Pauline}, the discovery of Shelley–Sun-treader was thrilling. It meant coming upon a new heaven and a new earth. First struck by his music and then by his words, the speaker "went on, and . soon the whole / Of his conceptions dawned" (416–19). He adopts the Sun-treader's libertarian ideals: "Men were to be as gods, and earth as heaven" (425). As for himself personally, he would be a bard, among that small but mighty band who are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. He would be like the Shelley of whom Browning wrote later in the \textit{Essay on Shelley}: able to perceive Power and Love in the absolute and Beauty and Good in the concrete and to throw, "from his poet's station between them both," swift, subtle, and "numerous films for the connection of each with each." Like Shelley's his verse would be a "sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondence of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal." "And I—ah! what a life was mine to be, / My whole soul rose to meet it" (427–28).

Believing himself a true visionary, a bard "who had the key to life" (425), he turned his gaze from the ideal "to look on real life, / Which was new to [him]" (440–41), to see how his goal for the perfection of mankind might be attained. What he discovered was a fallen world that seemed utterly devoid of those seeds that would burst forth in blossoms of perfection. What he had envisioned as a reality was "but a dream; and so adieu to it" (449). First went his hopes of perfecting mankind and with them his trust in men and his belief that liberty or virtue are soon to be attained. Then he lost faith even in his "motive's end, / And powers and loves; and human love went last" (460–61). Having put his whole faith in the realization of a beatific vision, he is bereft when that proves false; his idealism supplanted by cynicism, he yields up moral questions in despair.

The crisis described in \textit{Pauline} is remarkably similar to those recounted in \textit{The Prelude} and \textit{Sartor Resartus}, although neither work was available to Browning at the time \textit{Pauline} was written.\(^{10}\) What is noteworthy is that the crisis and the
recovery from it came early in Browning's career and at an age much younger than for other young men who experienced similar crises—Wordsworth, Carlyle, or Mill, for instance. It was doubtless the most important event in the poet's life\textsuperscript{11} (pace those who claim his marriage to Elizabeth Barrett was), not because of its intensity but because of its effect on his fundamental outlook: the rejection of the all-or-nothing attitude epitomized by Shelley and, as we shall see, the embracing of the idea of change as the basic law of life.

It was not only Shelley's philosophy that Browning recoiled from: it was also his whole mode of poetry. For Shelley the lyric was the chief means of expression, and what he sang of was himself, sometimes under other names but always recognizably Shelley. What he aimed to do was to elevate himself into a mythic role as poet and redeemer of the world, and what he presented in his verse was an ideal of himself, which he considered to be representative of mankind, as, for example, when in the preface to \textit{Alastor} he says that his poem "may be considered as allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind." With himself as his hero and his own inner experience as his subject matter, his poems are works of mythopoeic creation.

Such songs are beautiful, but are they true? That is, are the visions that they unfold anything more than lovely dreams of wish fulfillment? When the speaker in \textit{Pauline} attempts to act on them, he finds that he is like a wanderer who sees dimly in the distance strange towers and walled gardens thick with trees "where singing goes on, and delicious mirth, / And laughing fairy creatures peeping over"; but when on the morrow he comes there to live forever, he discovers that they are not there (450–56). No, the Sun-treader's "sweet imaginings are as an air, / A melody, some wond'rous singer sings" (221–22). They can be prized as the sweetest songs ever sung, expressions of man's highest and noblest aspirations, but as mythic allegories their truth is personal and private.

This is why Browning hereafter is deeply suspicious of the allegorical mode and contemptuous of bards. He cast aside forever all notions of the self as representative of mankind and of poetry as allegorical. Endowed with an acute consciousness
of self, Browning regarded himself as unique. "This is myself," the speaker of *Pauline* says three times—not myself as representative of anything, only myself as me. To be sure, he does not disavow the imagination, but his, unlike Shelley's, comes "not / In fitful visions, but [is] beside me ever" (285–86) to control and shape experience. He makes no pretense to rise to Shelley's lyrical mythicism. As the epigraph reads (in translation), "I AM NOT SAYING THAT THESE THINGS ARE GOOD FOR YOU, I AM ONLY TELLING THEM."

Browning also recognized that the equation of personal expression and lyric intensity yields lyric emotion at the expense of phantasms, melodramatic poses, and extreme irrational, emotional states. The expression of self as hero can produce not only visions but also hallucinations. In a word, turning inward can lead to madness. "I'll look within no more," says the speaker of *Pauline*. "I have too trusted to my own wild wants— / Too trusted to myself—to intuition" (937–39). Turning away from Shelley and other Romantic visionaries, Browning disavowed idealized autobiography and the subjectivity of lyric expression for the objectification of self offered by the dramatic mode: "I will tell / My state as though 'twere none of mine" (585–86). Here and hereafter, though there might be occasional resemblances between Browning and his characters, he and his hero were never to be one.

Browning did not, however, openly repudiate Shelley. On the contrary, *Pauline* closes with the speaker's apostrophe to the Sun-treader and his admission that he will lean on the older poet. What happens is not repudiation but a swerve away from Shelley, what Harold Bloom calls a *clinamen*. The process is subtle and complex, and Browning releases himself from the pervasive influence of Shelley by freezing the poetic visionary into the distant perfection of a star. First, however, the speaker in *Pauline* distances himself not by elevating the bard but by stressing the depth of his fall from the Sun-treader's ideals: "For I have nought in common with him—shapes / Which followed him avoid me, and I feel how low I am to him" (212–15). The descent means that as a poet he can no longer aim "even to catch a tone / Of all the harmonies which he called up" (216–17). But is this so bad?
Losing the Sun-treader has he lost everything? As he looks back, the speaker sees that even earlier, when he lost his faith in mankind, he had been aware of a compensatory gain: "new powers / Rose as old feelings left" (462–63). Furthermore, even at the height of the hold of the Sun-treader’s ideals, he doubted their validity for him: "I had oft been sad, / Mistrusting my resolves" (464–65).

There then occurs a great sense of liberation; he was at last his own man; "My powers were greater" (469). In the temple of his soul, nought was changed except that the idol was gone and a new, although darker, spirit had taken his place. As the newly freed poet wanders through the temple, shadowy troops rise to greet him as their king: "We serve thee now, and thou shalt serve no more!" (475). As for himself: "I felt once more myself—my powers were mine" (491).

This process of disentanglement and self-assertiveness engenders, however, a certain amount of guilt: glad to be free, he is also sad that an idol once adored is no longer worshiped. It is the "curse" of guilt "to see our idols perish" (545–46). Moreover, it is a question not only of guilt but also of amour-propre: one cannot admit that one was so foolish as to have revered a false idol. What is necessary for one’s psychic well-being is, then, to adopt a strategy that will retain the idol, but as the sun, whose light to seek at close range would be blinding: Shelley must be hyperbolized as the Sun-treader.¹³

First in the strategy comes the process of self-abasement. We, being lowly, made of clay—we may wither; but our fate should not extend to our idols. To witness paintings fade not only in color but in significance, to hear music that no longer moves us as it once did, to discover, in other words, that art wears out like everything else—this is a "curse" indeed! It is the curse of betrayal. "And I, perchance, half feel a strange regret, / That I am not what I have been to thee" (191–92), the speaker says to the Sun-treader. "For never more shall I walk calm with thee" (220). But most unsettling is the thought that one’s own work of the present is perhaps as meaningful as that of once-idolized predecessors of the past "whom trustingly / We sent before into Time’s yawning gulf"—"I’d be sad to equal them." To preserve them, "keep them for ever / In
beauty,” the speaker denies emulation of his idols by choosing a deferential position, “contented lowness”: “I’d feed their fame e’en from heart’s best blood, / Withering unseen, that they might flourish still” (545–59).

The second step of the strategy is elevation of the idol, now deposed from the altar in the temple of the soul, to a distant sphere in the heavens, transcendence erasing immanence. A series of metaphors accomplishes this. Once worshiped as “a sacred spring,” the divine water turns out to be “the fountain-head, / Long lost, of some great river,” which engulfs everything in its path (172–85). Rocks may try to turn or stay its course, but in vain. “So / Wert thou to me,” says the speaker, employing the past tense; and had he not removed himself from the vicinity of this river, he would have been drowned, sucked into the stream and made permanently a part of it, having no distinction of his own (190–91). Not to be admired as a close and mighty river, the Sun-treader is made a “Spirit” which, “its long task completed, . hath risen / And left us, never to return” (158–59). Yet though elevated, the Sun-treader still “seems bright with thy bright presence” (161):

But thou art still for me, as thou hast been. (162)

But thou art still for me, who have adored. (168)

The repetition suggests both continuity and stasis, the fixity of the “star” (171) that the Sun-treader has become, something immovable and therefore not of this world:

And if thou livest—if thou lovest, spirit!
Remember me, who set this final seal
To wandering thought—that one so pure as thou
Could never die.

(206–9)

The Sun-treader is sealed into eternity, unchangingness, and perfection, as the speaker—“a watcher, whose eyes have grown dim / With looking for some star”—perceives a heavenly light “which breaks on him, / Altered, and worn, and weak, and full
of tears" (227–29). Shelley is steadfast, Browning is vacillating; but Shelley is fixed forever and thus dead, whereas Browning is protean and alive.

The swerve away from Shelley allowed Browning to become a new and distinctive kind of poet. It did not, as I have said, entail repudiation of the older poet, whom Browning continued to regard with admiration and affection, as the Essay on Shelley makes abundantly clear. By the end of Pauline, Shelley is gathered into the artifice of eternity where dwell God and truth and love (1020–21). He can now be invoked as a figure permanently enshrined, on whom the speaker will hereafter "lean" (1023). Shelley can be "leaned" upon not for method or mode but for the vision of perfection that the poet must have ever before his eyes but that he knows he can never reach.

The irony of willed dependency that we notice in the case of the poet with regard to the Sun-treader is also discernible in his relation to Pauline. When Romantic ideals proved to be chimerical, he was left with nothing to cling to. It is almost a commonplace of Romantic literature that love for a woman is a means of validating human existence. As Shelley states in the preface to Alastor, it is through love of a woman that his hero "unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture." Having failed him in poetry and philosophy, Shelley might still be right about love. So the speaker turns in his despair to Pauline: "Thou lovedst me, and I wondered, and look in / My heart to find some feeling like such love" (578–79). But he finds no love there. The reason is that he cannot chain his soul to "its clay prison; this most narrow sphere" (591). Why love only one object when he can love many? His "love would pass . reason," but since "love must receive its objects from the earth, / While reason would be chainless," he cannot find an object that will embody all that he can imagine love and beauty to be. Thus his imagination has "sufficed to quell / All love below" (637–41). Poor inadequate Pauline, who fails her would-be lover not, like the Sun-treader, from soaring too loftily but from inability to get off the ground.

Where is, then, that love which "would quell / Reason, tho' it soared with the seraphim?" (642–43). It can only be self-
love, the self finding value only in its unchained subjectivity: "And yet I seem more warped in this than aught, / For here myself stands out more hideously" (646–47). But "thus it is that I supply the chasm / 'Twixt what I am and all that I would be" (676–77). He is not at ease in the situation and begins to feel self-love turn to self-hate (650–52). Why has he sought refuge in himself? Because of "the woes I saw and could not stay— / And love!—do I not love thee, my Pauline?" (688–89). Obviously in loving Pauline he loves himself. "I cherish prejudice, lest I be left / Utterly loveless" (690–91).

Pauline is not, however, his only "prejudice" or pretended love. He still loves liberty, poets ("tho' sad change has come there too"), and his native England (692–97), where apparently he will take Pauline to reside. But England, like Pauline, cannot encompass his fancies of where a home should be. So instead of England it must be "a home, out of the world; in thought" (730); whereupon he takes her on a magical mystery tour of England's green and pleasant land, finally settling among Wordsworthian hedgerows and smoking cots (732–807). But the England of Romantic nature poetry does not offer the imaginative freedom that his soul requires. For among the hedgerows "the bushes close, and clasp above, and keep / Thought in" and his "soul saddens when it looks beyond" (807–9). Once again the reality does not measure up to his preconception of it.

Throughout the poem there are images of expansion and contraction that reflect the speaker's urges and inabilities to transcend self. His position is a paradoxical one. When his soul is most contracted "into the dim orb / Of self" (91–92), it is also least bound; for it is all potential. When most expanded, it is least free; for it has had to restrict its possibilities. Of his first encounter with the Sun-treader's philosophy, he says: "My whole soul rose to meet it" (427). Yet instead of expansion of his powers, he experiences only the limitations of servitude. When he rebels against the Sun-treader, he says: "I felt once more myself" (491); "my powers were greater" (469). Likewise when he meets Pauline, he feels his soul rise up, only soon thereafter to feel suffocated. "And thus I know this earth is not my sphere, / For I cannot so narrow me, but that / I
still exceed it” (634–36). It is this alteration—“this wavering will” (653), “these struggling aims” (811)—that is the chief matter of the “confession”; and nowhere is it more notable than in the passage devoted to the English home “in thought,” where open spaces are “walled in with a sloped mound of matted shrubs” (750) and “tall trees over-arch to keep us in” (754) only to expand to vast spaces until the bushes of the copses and hedgerows close in again. Wordsworthian nature, domesticity, Pauline—all are signs of the “home,” enclosure and fixity, that the speaker fears.

Yet he recognizes that Pauline is “a last / Resource—an extreme want” (907–8). If in fact he had remained constant to her earlier, he would have been spared the “shame” he now feels (28). Yet still he can give her “not love, but faith” (43). Nevertheless, she must remain with him and shut him in from fear (1–5, 925–27). Earlier he had said that he could love nothing: “but sense supplies a love / Encircling me and mingling with my life” (311–12), and it is this very erotic “sense” that he now clings to as the redeeming aspect of his relationship with Pauline:

thy soft breast
Shall pant to mine—bend o’er me—thy sweet eyes,
And loosened hair, and breathing lips, and arms
Drawing me to thee.

(1–4)

How the blood lies upon her cheek, all spread
As thinned by kisses; only in her lips
It wells and pulses like a living thing,
And her neck looks, like marble misted o’er
With love-breath, a dear thing to kiss and love,
Standing beneath me—looking out to me,
As I might kill her and be loved for it.

(896–902)

Leave me not,
Still sit by me—with beating breast, and hair
Loosened— . . .
kissing me when I

Look up.

(925–29)

It will be noted that in the second of these quotations the speaker stands in a position superior to Pauline. This is, however, but momentary. He can refer to her as a frail winter flower, “offering / Its frail cup of three leaves to the cold sun” (712–13). He can say that he sustains his inamorata, who “lives in loving me, / Lives strangely on my thoughts, and looks, and words” (239–40). He can promise: “I have / Much yet to gladden you—to dawn on you” (934–35). But he can no more be a sun to Pauline than he can be equal to or rise above the Sun-treader. He knows full well that his must be a position of dependency, that his soul must “rest beneath / Some better essence than itself—in weakness” (818–19). It is his nature to adore (833). He will do anything, “only believing he is not unloved” (859). So, “No more of this—we will go hand in hand, / I will go with thee, even as a child, / Looking no further than thy sweet commands” (948–49). She will choose what and where their life will be, and he will lean on her as on the Sun-treader. The psychology of dependency in love adumbrated here will become more obvious and more pathological in much of Browning’s subsequent early work.

The leaning is, however, here as in the other case, provisional. Although at the moment he can “make an end in perfect joy” (994, 1007), he may also “be first to deny all” (991) because he remains “one half afraid / To make his riches definite” (998–99). Any end that is fixed can never claim his full allegiance. Deferment, openness, change—these are for him the aspects that make life vital. This is why Pauline must remain content to be the provisional redemptress of one who does “doubt not [that] many another bliss awaits” (1009).

The speaker’s relation to both Pauline and the Sun-treader involves a concept of love and power: he can love only that to which he attributes power. This puts him in an anomalous position because he feels a strong sense of power within himself. In his self-analysis he states that he possesses an intense consciousness of self. This self is felt to be supreme, existing as
a center to all things and aiming to create, rule, and call upon
all things to minister to it. Allied to this is a sense of restless­
ness "which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all" (269–78). The self in other words would subjugate and violate
all things so as to penetrate, possess, and know them fully. At
the same time the self needs to feel that it is not the omnipo­
tent entity that it wishes to be, needs something to give direc­
tion and purpose to the exercise of power: "never acting from
myself" but "trusting in a hand that leads" (306–7). The soul
first says, "I should rule" (343), but then, on second thought,

The soul would never rule—
It would be first in all things—it would have
Its utmost pleasure filled,—but that complete
Commanding for commanding sickens it.
(814–17)

As we have seen, Pauline and the Sun-treader are both granted
command, but the power they have over him proceeds only
from himself, not from them. What he requires is a power over
which he can have no control: "And what is that I hunger for
but God?" (821).

The God-hunger has long been with him. As a boy he “saw
God every where” (302), but during adolescence he came to
doubt God’s “being” (305). Now he feels “a need, a trust, a
yearning after God,” although accompanying and “reconciled”
with this feeling was “a neglect of all deemed his laws” (295–98); and “this feeling still has fought / Against . . . rea­
son and resolves” (308–9). The speaker does not pretend to
any direct experience of the divine; his is simply the expres­
sion of a need, and because of the need he can work himself
up to an emotional state that allows him to say, “I need thee,
and I feel thee, and I love thee,” this in spite of the fact that
he disclaims any rapture at God’s work or any belief in
immortality: “but there is that in me / Which turns to thee,
which loves, or which should love” (821–30). As in the
instances of the Sun-treader and Pauline, the speaker returns
to God not so much out of love for Deity as out of the neces­
sity for a superior power who can love him and be a support
on which to lean. If there is not this power, then it is impossible to escape solipsism. The imagination can be "an angel" (285), but it can also be a demon that causes "a mind like this [to] dissipate itself" (291) while "draining the wine alone in the still night" (940). "Take from me powers, and pleasures," he pleads to God, "so I see thee" (845–46). God's "being" may be doubted but his "presence" (305–6) is a necessity of "soul."

Until he locates this "presence" that is power, the speaker cannot hope to love. For the divine presence alone can sanction the immediate and the imperfect, which he would but cannot love. He has attempted to foist this role on Pauline and the Sun-treader but discovers that they can be no more than mediate figures to be idolized until he reaches God. "Do I not feel a love which only ONE.....?" he asks, in an unfinished question (837). The answer must be yes, an affirmation not of feeling but of will. And having so willed, he can turn to Pauline and say: "And now, my Pauline, I am thine for ever!" (860).

The God affirmed is, however, no more than a convenient (if necessary) fiction. He is "the last point" that turns the soul that "would be first in all things" into a dependent that would "rest beneath / Some better essence than itself—in weakness" (815–19); the God of Pauline's lover is "the last point" where "tend—these struggling aims" (811). As the "end in perfect joy" (994, 1007), God is distanced into stillness and eternity, and thus out of this world into a realm of abstractions where dwell beauty, truth, and love (1006, 1020–21). But this is Deity conceived by "one half afraid / To make his riches definite" (998–99): it is Deity that, in a special sense, is both Alpha and Omega and thus allows for expansion as well as enclosure. "I shall again go o'er the tracts of thought," says the speaker, "As one who has a right" (1013–14), and in doing so may reconceive Deity, "the last point" that is but a provisional "end in perfect joy."

By confessing the means and ends of his soul's development in respect to art, love, and religion, the speaker in Pauline arrives at the point of self-definition. "This is myself" (279); "these make myself" (313); finally, "this is 'myself'—not what
I think should be” (820). The self is ultimately defined in terms of the will. In his relation to the Sun-treader, Pauline, and God, the speaker resigns his will so as to place himself in a position of secondariness, but always with the knowledge that the possibility remains for the will to reassert its priority: “the sole proof / Of a commanding will is in that power / Repressed” (621–23), the power in hiding being a “bright slave” of which he “cannot be but proud” (633). What the will represses can of course be rediscovered later on, summoned up by “a commanding will.” Much of what the speaker confesses is, by his own declaration, foul and shameful, and hence to be willed away. Yet this which “lies in [him] a chained thing” is “still ready / To serve if [he] loose its slightest bond” (631–33).

What the “I” learns from his “confession” that the will is at the center of the self is that the most contrary statements that can be made about his soul are alike true. For the soul wishes both continuity and change, primacy and secondariness, openness and enclosure, expansion and contraction. It finds itself always in the present, which is the gap between desire and realization, repression and reclamation, oblivion and recovery, the moment of something ever about to be: “And thus it is that I supply the chasm / 'Twixt what I am and all that I would be” (676–77). For such a soul nothing is fixed, all conclusions being but new points of beginning.

The belief in change embraced here is not developed into a philosophy, as it will be in Browning’s next poem. We see, nevertheless, that allied to it is a belief in progress, which is figured as the ascent of a mountain. Pauline in her note speaks of the plateaus that her lover achieves and that then become points of departure to attain yet other heights that in turn must be surmounted. Because it is conceived linearly, the advance must have an end; but as we have noticed, the terminal point recedes with each advance toward it so that there is never any possibility of its being attained. Nowhere is this clearer than at the close of the confession. Having given his “vision” of himself, the speaker thereupon asserts, almost in passing, that he will be the first to deny all and despise this verse that incorporates “these intents which seem so fair” (991–92). His visions are quickly subject to revisions.
At the end we witness the increased disjunction between the empirical self of the poet and the separated self of the poem. For it is in the nature of a joke that the poet has his fictional speaker say twice that he can “make an end in perfect joy” (994, 1007). In the first place, this is not an end in any conventional sense of the word. As the speaker tells us, this is but the “first stage” of his life (885). In the second place, for one embracing the doctrine of becoming there can be no “last point.” In the third place, the achievement of perfection is vitiated, as the speaker himself asserts, by the fact that in a dynamic universe perfection is a sign of death and decay. In the fourth place, the joy is more than offset by “a lurking fear” (995) of one “half afraid” (998) who feels “this weak soul sink, and darkness come” (1010). Whatever joy there is in this “end” is purely delusory, self-induced. “I shall be priest and lover, as of old” (1019), or, in the revised text, “I shall be priest and prophet as of old”—we have just witnessed his farewell to any claim to the bardic throne when he shed the mantle of the Sun-treader. “I believe in God, and truth, / And love” (1020–21)—we have noted how he believes in them only as necessary fictions.

Not realizing the ironic nature of the poem, commentators have more often than not attributed the speaker’s confession to Browning himself. But it is increasingly clear as the narrative progresses that the empirical self of the poet withdraws from this linguistic entity that is the “confession.” Believing it possible to be redeemed by language into the state where he can once again be “trusting in truth and love” (87), the dramatized self does indeed claim that, through verbal reenactment and repetition of the past, he has reached the point of self-control where he is “won by a word again / Into my old life” (237–38) of believing in God and truth and love. We have just noted how such an affirmation is based on a willed repression of thoughts and feelings revealed in the confession. He can be the “perfect bard” (893)—the “priest and lover, as of old” (1019)—only by committing himself to the imagined life that is the world of language. As Browning discovered, the self that exists only in the form of language may aid the empirical self in achieving differentiation and definition; but it is no
more than a linguistic construct whose authenticity must be denied. Language can be psychologically therapeutic, a step forward in self-articulation. The separated self suggests this when he says that in future dark moments of the soul "some little word shall light it up again, / And I shall see all clearer and love better" (1011–12), just as this "little word" that is his confession has done in this instance. But that language has reality or meaning of its own is called into question by the assertion of the aesthetic self that this is an "end" in which he speaks as a bard, whose words are of doubtful authenticity.

It is indeed Browning's strategy to distance his empirical self from his separated, linguistically realized self. He does this not only in the "affirmation" at the close but also in other parts of the poem. The note in French signed by Pauline, the Latin headnote from Agrippa, the motto from Marot in French, the affixed dates at the beginning and end—all these are signals that the confession is not the poet's; they may even be signals of Browning's intention as to genre—that is, signals that the work should be regarded as a fictional edition.16

In her role as editor, Pauline has presumably performed several services. First, she has prepared the text for publication. She may even have arranged and rearranged certain sections of the confession—she speaks of considering "à mieux coordonner certaines parties." Second, she has provided a critical note in which she emphasizes the importance of genre in evaluating the poem and also points out its artistic defects.17 Third, she has attempted to illuminate the confession by prefixing two quotations. The motto from Marot on the title page suggests that change is the basic theme of the poem. The quotation from Cornelius Agrippa on the reverse title page cautions the (learned) reader that the poem is the work of a youth and that its emotional extravagances should perhaps not be taken too seriously. Fourth, Pauline has supplied the place and date of the poem's composition and of her final editorial work.18

Editing is of course a way of distancing experience, setting the fictional self at a still further remove; it is a technical means of separating story from narration and thereby asserting the essential negativity of the fiction; in brief, it is an obvi-
ous artifice that obviates any confusion about the coincidence of life and art. In her note Pauline tells us that the confession is not fully intelligible and perhaps not fully trustworthy, and she tries briefly to give us her understanding of the poem. But is Pauline’s judgment to be accepted? She herself says that it would be best to burn the “fragment”—“mais que faire?” The fact remains that she does not burn it but undertakes to have it published. Only through her does her lover have his say. From one point of view, Pauline as editor represents the empirical self as it comes to an articulation of itself when the confession is completed. Yet from another point of view, she is as much a fiction as the “I” of the confession, the one no more and no less real than the other. In her role as editor, she provides another perspective and so keeps the poem within Browning’s ironic view of the world. For she maintains the double vision that the speaker of the confession seeks in the final phases of his song to surpass. Pauline’s role is to keep open and dynamic (even though by her editorial work she ironically encloses the “fragment,”) the dialectic of self that is ever being threatened by closure and stasis.

*Pauline* shows us clearly the double vision that characterized Browning from beginning to end. In his last works he was still posing the same question implied in *Pauline*: “Advantage would it prove or detriment / If I saw double?” he asks in the parleying “With Gerard De Lairesse” (118–19). Browning like the lover of Pauline had a soul that he could not chain:

> it will not rest
> In its clay prison; this most narrow sphere—
> It has strange powers, and feelings, and desires,
> Which I cannot account for, nor explain,
> But which I stifle not, being bound to trust
> All feelings equally—to hear all sides:
> Yet I cannot indulge them, and they live,
> Referring to some state or life unknown.

(593–600)

Fortunately he learned early that no life can indulge the desire
to view an object or an event from all sides not sequentially but simultaneously. Only God can assume this supreme stance. Yet, as Mrs. Orr suggests, Browning could never entirely forgo what Hillis Miller calls "a central adventure of romanticism—the attempt to identify oneself with God." He did not forgo it, but neither did he yield to it. He turned from an outmoded Romantic vision, represented in this first work mainly by Shelley, to an ironic double vision that accepts certain opposites as antinomies and therefore irreconcilable. As we see in *Pauline* and as we shall see hereafter, the self, calling on the revolutionary potential of time, is always in process, always glorifying its own self-activity and therefore is its own lord and master.

I do not claim that in *Pauline* the poet has accomplished all he purposed to do. After all, this is Browning at twenty. The style is not yet distinctive, although sufficiently characteristic for Rossetti to come upon the anonymous work in the British Museum almost fifteen years later and recognize it as Browning's.

Night, and one single ridge of narrow path
Between the sullen river and the woods
Waving and muttering—for the moonless night
Has shaped them into images of life,
Like the upraising of the giant-ghosts,
Looking on earth to know how their sons fare.
Thou art so close by me, the roughest swell
Of wind in the tree-tops hides not the panting
Of thy soft breasts.

(732–40)

That is not Browning; it is a kind of general Romantic style. Moreover, the fusion of the dramatic and the lyrical elements in the poem is not entirely successful because the speaker's utterance is not conditioned by the presence of the auditor, who is to a large extent spoken of as though she were not present. The speaker is, on the other hand, more dramatically portrayed than are those of Romantic confessions or monodramas; he cannot be ignored as a character, but at the same
time he does not sufficiently engage our sympathy in this monologue of 1,031 lines. It was to require further experimentation in the dramatic mode before Browning learned how to individualize character to the extent that he could elicit our sympathetic interest in foolish or despicable speakers. In addition, the attempt to achieve a perspective other than the speaker's is so inadequately handled that readers have not even recognized what the poet aimed to do. This rudimentary attempt at a fictional edition lacks technical expertise.

But in spite of its deficiencies, *Pauline* is more than the "abortion," "crab," and "eyesore" that Browning later called it. In my opinion it is much better than modern critics have been wont to allow. Many passages of its blank verse are powerfully dramatic and lyrical, as for example:

But I begin to know what thing hate is—
To sicken, and to quiver, and grow white,
And I myself have furnished its first prey.
All my sad weaknesses, this wavering,
This selfishness, this still decaying frame...
But I must never grieve while I can pass
Far from such thoughts—as now—Andromeda!
And she is with me—years roll, I shall change,
But change can touch her not—so beautiful
With her dark eyes, earnest and still, and hair
Lifted and spread by the salt-sweeping breeze;
And one red-beam, all the storm leaves in heaven,
Resting upon her eyes and face and hair,
As she awaits the snake on the wet beach,
By the dark rock; and the white wave just breaking
At her feet, quite naked and alone,—a thing
You doubt not, nor fear for, secure that God
Will come in thunder from the stars to save her.
Let it pass—I will call another change.

(650–68)

That is poetry which is meant to be read aloud; it is speech which suggests the nervous, vacillating, almost schizophrenic character of the speaker. And formally the whole has sophisti-
cation and breadth of conception. The idea of an open-ended "fragment" enclosed within an editorial apparatus, a form reflecting the imagery of expansion and contraction adumbrated in the confession—this shows an intellectual maturity and an artistic daring that belie the author's mere twenty years. We should not accept Browning's epithets of opprobrium for his first work any more readily than we accept Keats's dismissal of *Endymion* (in the preface) as "a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished."