IN THE NOTE APPENDED TO PAULINE, THE EDITOR says that the only merit to which "une production si singuliè re" can pretend is "celui de donner une idée assez précise" of the genre that has been merely sketched. In his next work Browning wrote in the foreword: "I am anxious that the reader should not, at the very outset—mistaking my performance for one of a class with which it has nothing in common—judge it by principles on which it was never moulded, and subject it to a standard to which it was never meant to conform." The fact is, he says, no matter how the text might otherwise appear, "I have endeavoured to write a poem, not a drama." Nor, he goes on to say, has he written a dramatic poem, which, as he understands the genre, means accepting the limitations of acted drama without any compensatory benefits. To help us understand this work that looks like a play but that its author disclaimed as a drama and insisted was a poem, perhaps it would be salutary to begin with a brief consideration of the drama and dramatic literature earlier in the century.

With its emphasis on causality in the moral as well as in the physical world, the philosophical empirical tradition laid great stress on investigation of the motives of action. Extended to drama, it was to lead actors and critics alike to suspect that human action has no meaning unless referred to the mental state that prompted it. The acting styles of Garrick, Mrs. Siddons, Kemble, and especially Kean sought to reveal a character's nature by exposing his motives to the audience; in the plays in which they acted, character consequently tended to predominate over action. Action or plot, which Aristotle had found the "soul" of tragedy, yielded primacy to thought and feeling. Addressing himself to modern drama, A. W. Schlegel spoke of "a new definition in the conception of action, namely, the reference to the idea of moral liberty, by which
alone man is considered as the first author of his determination.” Coleridge, contrasting modern literature with that of the Greeks, observed that the modern achieves an opposite effect from the ancient “by turning the mind inward on its essence instead of letting it act only on its outward circumstances and communities.” By 1829 John Henry Newman could say, with the air of one uttering what had never been doubted, “The action then will be more justly viewed as the vehicle for introducing the personages of the drama, than as the principal object of the poet’s art; it is not in the plot, but in the characters, sentiments, and diction, that the actual merit and poetry of the composition are found.”

Stressing character over action, the actor reserved his talents and energies for the big scenes when motives are disclosed, so that a play like Richard III, Hamlet, and Macbeth became, in the hands of Sarah Siddons or Edmund Kean, a series of “moments.” Writing of their acting styles, Joseph Donahue says: “Plunged into the immediate situation, [the actor] has no time to meditate on his reactions; they burst forth at the instant they are formed in the mind, impelling him into the future. Subsequent moments, drawing forth repeated demonstrations of his responsive nature, reveal the struggle of the mind with the varying forms of passion. Only these moments, as they occur, are real.” Henry Siddons’s Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action, Adapted [from the German] to the English Stage (1807) presupposes that dramatic reality consists entirely of a sequence of “moments,” each revealing the character’s nature by eliciting a reaction to a situation. Coleridge said of Kean: “To see him act, is like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning.”

An acting style emphasizing the moments of passion served to reinforce, and be reinforced by, a general demand throughout the first part of the nineteenth century for a literature of lyrical intensity. Wordsworth’s emphasis on poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling,” Coleridge’s insistence on the intuitive nature of the creative act, Shelley’s belief in the evanescence of artistic inspiration, Keats’s claim that “the excellence of every Art is its intensity”—all such statements attest to the prevalence during the first two decades of
the century of the idea that all literature, but especially poetry, properly aims at brief lyrical effects. By 1835 these sentiments had hardened into dogma. Newman, in the essay (1829) referred to earlier, was intent upon establishing a critical theory based on the “essence” of poetry rather than its “externals” and maintaining that a poem is the result of the poet’s “rush of emotions” and “feelings” instead of his logical constructive powers. In two essays of 1833—“What is Poetry?” and “The Two Kinds of Poetry”—John Stuart Mill denigrated narrative and praised lyric as “more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other,” it being “the poetry most natural to a really poetic temperament.” Alexander Smith, writing on “The Philosophy of Poetry” in 1835, spoke on the subject with the assurance of one summing up orthodox doctrine: “The essential character . . . of a poetical narrative or description is this—that its direct object is not to convey information, but to intimate a subject of feeling, and transmit that feeling from one mind to another.” Hence “the interest derived from story, incident, and character, can be equally well conveyed in prose composition, nay, infinitely better, from a variety of causes, and chiefly from the inadmissibility, in poetry, of the mention of any fact not calculated to be spoken of with emotion.”

In the drama of the early 1800s, such attitudes resulted in the lyrical dramas of the great Romantics that center almost exclusively on the moral development of the protagonists, in the works of playwrights like Joanna Baillie and Henry Hart Milman that reduce action to a minimum and concentrate on dialogue as a means of exposition of motive, and in the dramatic scenes and fragments of Landor and Barry Cornwall. Looking over the state of the English theater in 1823, George Darley observed in one of his “Letters to the Dramatists of the Day”: “Action is the essence of drama; nay, its definition. . . . But that essence you, Gentlemen, seem with one consent sedulously to avoid meddling with. . . . You seem to think that the whole virtue of tragedy lies in its poeticity.” At the end of the next decade, a French observer of the English stage made almost the same comment.

The theory and practice of a literature of dramatic
“moments” was to have a strong effect upon Browning’s early career. Pauline had “shadowed out” the “first stage” (884-85) of a man’s life. In Paracelsus Browning’s aim was more ambitious: to recount all stages in the life of his protagonist. A work in the narrative mode must surely have first suggested itself; but Browning found narrative technique tedious, and, in addition, he seems to have shared Mill’s view that, considered as poetry, narratives are “of the lowest and most elementary kind,” appealing mainly to those “in a rude state” of society or to the “idle and frivolous” in more advanced societies. Eschewing conventional narrative technique, he decided to cast the poem that was to “shadow out” all stages of his hero’s life in dialogue form. To do this, he would choose the most important events in the career of his protagonist so as to make them moments of lyrical intensity.\(^13\)

The advantages of such a form were numerous. First, it would relieve him of the tedious part of narrative writing, what Tennyson wearily referred to as “the perpetual ‘said’ and its varieties.”\(^14\) Second, it would reduce the “prose” parts of his narrative by focusing only on critical moments, thus becoming a discontinuous narrative. Third, it would permit the development of a “soul” to be witnessed without the distracting incidents and descriptions in conventional narrative or dramatic writing. The result—a series of dramatic fragments or moments organized around the life of one person and presented discontinuously—would be a new genre permitting the poet to achieve what other poets and critics had been proclaiming as an ideal during the first third of the nineteenth century: a narrative that was both lyric and dramatic.

In the work, as indeed in Browning’s future works, character is dominant over action, which is reduced to a minimum. Somewhat like Wordsworth, in whose Lyrical Ballads, according to its preface, “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and the situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling,” Browning attempts in his poem to reverse the method usually adopted by writers whose aim it is to set forth any phenomenon of the mind or the passions, by the operation of persons and events; and that, instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I
desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded.

This means that each scene catches Paracelsus at a critical moment in which he examines and reveals his inner life, or "mood," and is brought by the utterance to new insights allowing him to act. In effect, the five scenes are like five monologues. To be sure, there are other characters who are not mere auditors as in Pauline; but the focus being exclusively on Paracelsus, the other figures do not enlist the reader's interest. The reviewer of Paracelsus for the Spectator (15 August 1835) perceived this when he observed that "the fundamental plan renders the whole a virtual soliloquy, each person of the drama speaking up to Paracelsus, in order to elicit his feelings, thoughts, or opinions." To use Henry James's term, Festus, Michal, even Aprile are mere ficelles.

Like Pauline, Paracelsus focuses on soul-making and the ironies involved. "I go to prove my soul," says the protagonist (1.559), and in doing so he comes to a conclusion whose "drift and scope," said the poet, "are awfully radical."15 For in the process he discovers that the "principle of restlessness" disclosed in Pauline (277) is not only characteristic of the soul but is also the creative principle of the universe: nothing is; all—nature, mankind, God—are ever becoming. Having apparently interrupted composition of a longer poem, Sordello, to work out a statement of the philosophical irony upon which his subsequent work was to be based, Browning wrote Paracelsus hurriedly, in late 1834 and early 1835, and published it, at the expense of his father, several months later, in August 1835.

For his protagonist the poet chose the Renaissance scientist and mage Paracelsus—"the father of modern chymistry" and also a "theosophist" as he is called in the note to the poem. One of the first empirical scientists, Paracelsus was among the early expounders of the modern scientific view of life, one that called into question the medieval Christian view of the universe as perfectly structured and enclosed. But he was also the practitioner of magic who relied on an older view of the world
for spiritual insight. As Browning uses him, he is a restless seeker after knowledge who aims to delve into all aspects of the physical and spiritual universe until he comes to "the secret of the world" (1. 277), "to comprehend the works of God, / And God himself, and all God's intercourse / With our own mind" (1. 533–35). In other words, Browning's Paracelsus begins with the belief that the world is mind, that the individual consciousness can encounter universal consciousness—Wordsworth's Nature, Shelley's unseen Power—and that the encounter can be recorded in language.

Paracelsus unleashes what the speaker of *Pauline* had "repressed"—"a craving after knowledge," which had been "chained" but which remained "still ready / To serve, if [he] loose its slightest bond" (*Pauline*, 620–33). Once unleashed, it becomes for Paracelsus a monomania, "one tyrant all- / Absorbing aim" (2. 152–53) that has "made life consist of one idea" (2. 140). Having no purpose other than itself, "in itself alone / Shall its reward be—not an alien / Blending therewith" (2. 285–87). And supercharged with this idea, Paracelsus has rejected all help: the emotions of love or fear and the work of sages of the past. As though he were a new Adam, he asserts his own priority. It is not until he, like Pauline's lover, recognizes his dependency and secondariness that he penetrates to the perception that his quest was misconceived.

In Paracelsus as in Pauline's lover, the principle of restlessness is linked to an intense consciousness of self that keeps him constantly aware of his empirical self acting in the natural world: he is forever looking at himself going about certain activities. This ironic consciousness of role-playing provides the basic metaphor of the poem and, as we shall see, dictates its mode. In order to play his role correctly, Paracelsus must first come to terms with the text of the play, which he discovers to be written partly by himself and in the language of poetry instead of prose.

The protagonist believes himself called by God "to be his organ" (1. 295), " singled out" (1. 369) to play the role of "God's commissary" (1. 609). As the would-be "star to men" (1. 527), he will have no supporting cast, his script being a one-man play "loaded with fate" (1. 552). What he is called to
do is to release the "mind" and "truth" imprisoned within himself so that it can meet the One Mind that is Truth (1.726-37). In this way alone can he comprehend "God himself" and consequently "the works of God" (1.533-34) that are nature. But, asks his friend Festus, if Paracelsus has undertaken to read the physical universe as the text where God has revealed himself, why does he not begin with the books in which other men have recorded their experiences of truth? Paracelsus replies that he has been permitted vision in which he has "gazed / Presumptuous on Wisdom's countenance, / No veil between," and now he cannot be guided by others, "whom radiance ne'er distracts" and whose eyes are "unfed by splendour" (1.515-22). He will follow no prints but will see his way "as birds their trackless way," God directing them both (1.560, 565). The mediation of print is not required for those who wish to read beyond the thing to the Thing-in-itself.

In scene one Paracelsus views the phenomenal world as the robe or veil of the noumenal world, and believes it possible to transcend the thing (the world as it is perceived by the human mind) to reach the Thing-in-itself (the world as it actually is). Like Carlyle's hero in *Sartor Resartus*, which appeared in serial form in 1833-34 and may well have influenced the composition of the poem, Paracelsus aims to know the world out of clothes, the form without the vesture. "Perfect and true perception" is prevented only by "a baffling and perverting carnal mesh" (1.731-32). "By searching out the laws by which the flesh / Accloys the spirit," one may "win some day the august form / Of truth" (1.775-78). Insofar as he is concerned at this time with the language of his role, he believes that once he has discovered Truth he will be able to communicate it to others in words, although (significantly) at present, while promising to speak in "words and ways" true to his heart, he finds that speech "but ill / Expresses what [he] would convey" (1.15, 428-29). "I am priest," he declares just on the point of departure (1.801), and has no doubt that he will return as prophet.

In scene two he is no longer so assured that he is God's commissary. It may be that God enjoys his own role as puppeteer and "takes pleasure in confounding us" (2.180). Surely
this must be the answer, or else he is losing his sanity. "God! Thou art Mind!" he cries out like a Romantic visionary. "Unto the master-Mind / Mind should be precious. Spare my mind alone!" (2. 229–30). But what matter whether he has succeeded or not? He will still "reject / Single rewards," will "ask them in the lump" for "now 't is all or nothing"; he cannot "stop short of such / Full consummation" (2. 203–8).

Paracelsus admits that the text which he was to read is not so easily interpreted. No longer able to read unaided, he has come to ask the help of a Greek conjuror, whose first requirement is that he chronicle his life in a book. Speaking of his biography there set down as though it were a text to be interpreted, Paracelsus scorns the "uncouth recordings" and "blurred characters" in which he and others have written the accounts of themselves: "And yet those blottings chronicle a life— / A whole life, and my life" (2. 37–38). Reading over the text, he discovers how he has failed: he has scorned the vesture of truth, which he misconceived as falsehood. The "shows" of the world—life and death, light and shadow—he has read as

bare receptacles,
Or indices of truth to be wrung thence,
Not ministers of sorrow or delight—
A wondrous natural robe.

(2. 156–60)

And having wasted his life in misreading, he finds it difficult to read at all here in the near-darkness where there is only light from the putrefying depths of self (2. 175–76). But still God could send light, here in this very city where Constantine was sent a luminous sign (2. 265–66). To Paracelsus too God could reveal outright the clue by which all phenomenal signs are to be read.

At this moment there comes "a voice from within"—the voice of Aprile, the complementary aspect of Paracelsus' personality. Where Paracelsus seemed to embody power in his relentless quest after knowledge, Aprile appears to be the embodiment of love. Where Paracelsus has disvalued the worth of the vestures of truth, Aprile has worshiped its robe,
has, like Keats, loved beauty for what it is, not for what it means. To him the signs to be read are so lovely in themselves that he never tries to see beyond them. Overwhelmed and bewildered by the beauties of the phenomenal world, he has not had the strength to deal with them, replicate them in his art. But he has been like Paracelsus in that his too has been an all-or-nothing attitude. Because he could not capture all of life, he has set down none of it. Wishing to “love infinitely, and be loved” (2. 420), he has aspired to transmute all life into beautiful forms for the love of mankind, somehow overcoming the defects of “common speech,” which was “useless to [his] ends” (2. 607a), and employing the “heart’s language” (2. 560). Now at the end of his life, he recognizes that no one can overlap time to eternity but must work in the present with limited means and rude tools. “Yes; I see now—God is the PERFECT POET, / Who in his poem acts his own creations” (2. 648–49). No human can play the role God plays: he is both the playwright and the superstar.

The meeting of Paracelsus and Aprile is an encounter without dialogue, even though it is written as a colloquy: neither listens to the other. Aprile believes, in spite of all Paracelsus’ disclaimers, that the man he addresses is the true poet who, taking advantage of time and opportunity, has achieved all that a master poet-dramatist could attain. Greeting him at the beginning as king, Aprile dies in his delusion that Paracelsus is the king of poets.

Like Paracelsus, Aprile had wished to assert his priority, his independence of tradition. What he learns, in his last moments, is his secondariness and dependency. The voice he hears is that of a chorus of poets who welcome him as their peer and who admit that theirs too has been a failure of attainment, poetry being a matter of “still beginning, ending never” (2. 324). Yet because he has aspired he can join them. But now convinced of his dependency, Aprile cannot accept the crown they offer: “Crown me? I am not one of you! / ’Tis he, the king, you seek” (2. 658–59). Only in acknowledging his dependency does Aprile attain to that love to which he aspired.

Paracelsus, still strongly imbued with a sense of power, can-
not understand Aprile's message. And despite all that Aprile tells him, Paracelsus continues to regard himself as the lord and king on whom the feeble poet is to lean for support: "Lean thus, / And breathe my breath. I shall not lose one word / Of all your speech—one little word, Aprile" (2.655-57). Paracelsus still insists on his own priority, believing that only by a beneficent exercise of power is he to love.

His misunderstanding of what Aprile tells him is curious. It is curious because Aprile never attributes his own failure to the fact that he did not recognize knowledge in his ideal. As Paracelsus formulates it, he believes that he and the poet are "halves of one dissever'd world" who must not part till Aprile the lover knows and he the knower loves (2.634-37). Though perhaps complementary, they are only alike in their passion for ultimates. As personalities they are totally different and contrasting. It is all the more surprising, therefore, when Paracelsus decides to emulate Aprile, indeed assume his role. Abjuring the desire to know infinitely so as to seek infinite love, he is unheedful of Aprile's explanation that absolute love and beauty belong to God alone.

For five years Paracelsus tries to play Aprile's role. In scene three he has become in the eyes of the world "the wondrous Paracelsus—the dispenser / Of life, the commissary of Fate, the idol / Of princes" (3.14-16). Yet according to the paragon himself it is his "proud fate / To lecture to as many thick-scutt'd youths / As please to throng to the theatre each day" (3.148-50). He has forced himself to play a role for which he is totally unsuited, and he can at present "put off / The wearisome vest of falsehood" only in the presence of his friend (3.284-85). Yet this is "a rehearsal" (3.301) for his future performance when, the theater crammed, "the zany of the show" will put off his "trappings" (3.290-98). "I shall rejoice," Paracelsus says, "when my part in the farce is shuffled through, / And the curtain falls" (3.591-92). Finally, he will reveal himself entirely and without costume to his uncomprehending audience; but that must wait: "That is the crowning operation claim'd / By the arch-demonstrator—heaven the hall, / And earth the audience" (3.735-37). At present he is not sure what he is supposed to be about. God has given him no direction:
“I know as much of any will of His / As knows some dumb and tortur’d brute” (3. 517–18). In his direction of the play, God is much clearer as to what he does not want than what he does in fact desire (3. 599–602).

Paracelsus is unsuccessful as a professor because he cannot communicate his “truth”—that is, he will not accommodate himself to the requirements of teaching: “to possess was one thing—to display / Another” (3. 654–55). He is pleased to compare himself to his contemporary Martin Luther as a fellow worker in the enterprise of bringing light to the world, but Luther succeeds where Paracelsus fails because he has learned the use of words, not only through his translation of the Bible into the vernacular—the “common speech” to which Aprile referred—but also by making it available in print. Festus begs Paracelsus that, since he cannot lecture successfully, he should take advantage of the newly invented printing press for the dissemination of “the precious lore / Obscured by [Paracelsus’] uncouth manner, or unfit / For raw beginnings” so that eventually what the professor would impart “shall be all-reveal’d” (3. 915–20). Parcelsus’ reply is in effect an admission that he does not in fact have the proper language in which to set down his discoveries:

I possess
Two sorts of knowledge—one, vast, shadowy, hints
Of the unbounded aim I once pursued—
The other, many secrets, made my own
While bent on nobler prize, and not a few
First principles which may conduct to much:
These last I offer to my followers here.
Now bid me chronicle the first of these,
My ancient study, and in effect you bid me
Revert to the wild course I have abjured.
And, for the principles, they are so simple
    I do not see
But that my lectures serve indifferent well.
(3. 922–31, 939–40)

The first type of knowledge he can scarcely be said to possess
become because he cannot express it even to himself. The second he cannot make accessible to others. He has consequently resorted to outrageous displays of antics and bombast: "wild words" (3.308), "foolish words" (3.752), which even his devoted Festus finds incomprehensible (3.496), hard to "interpret" (3.544). Of these Browning says, in a note to the poem that was added in a later edition, "Bombast, his proper name, probably acquired from the characteristic phraseology of his lectures, that unlucky signification which it has ever since retained."

By the end of scene three, Paracelsus despairs not only of himself but of mankind in general. Yet still he perseveres in his belief that "man must be fed with angel's food" (3.1014-15). The divine must be realized in the present. Casting off the role of Aprile, he says he will eventually return to his old search for absolute knowledge even though aware of the futility of the quest.

In scene four, the expected reaction against him having come, Paracelsus has left Basel. As long as he was the antic performer of "fantastic gambols leading to no end" (4.85) he drew huge applauding audiences. But once he ceased to be a monologist and attempted to develop dialogue with his students—"a trust in them and a respect—a sort / Of sympathy for them" (4.92-93)—they turned against him; they wanted only a show. Having tried to display the love that he believed Aprile enjoined upon him and having failed to do so, he will now reassert his power by returning to his old quest. It matters not "how the farce plays out, / So it be quickly play'd." The "rabble" are admonished to sit safely in "snug back-seats" so as to "leave a clear arena" for the brave actor about to perish for their sport: "Behold!" (4.688-93).

The quest as Paracelsus now conceives it is correctly described as farce. For he will seek knowledge in every experience life has to offer, no matter how degraded. Recanting his old belief about the nature of the universe, he says that "mind is nothing but disease, / And natural health is ignorance" (4.279-80). He now embraces the vestures of the world with a vengeance, besieging knowledge by grasping at any and all outward shows: "All helps—no one shall exclude the rest"
Throughout scene four, in expression of his new view, Paracelsus is drunk. It is a bravura performance that the farceur gives in scene four, including a satirical lyric elegizing his past dreams ("Heap cassia, sandal-buds, and stripes") and a lyrical tale offered as a parable ("Over the sea our galleys went"). Much of what he says is by his own admission "cant," "petty subterfuges," a "frothy shower of words" (4.627-28). More and more Paracelsus is drawn to the conclusion that language is but expression of a point of view, that truth cannot be encompassed in words. "We live and breathe deceiving and deceived" (4.625). Words themselves are but vestures, not the thing itself; they "wrap, as tetter, morphew, furfair / Wrap the flesh" (4.630-31). Indeed, some things cannot be put into words at all: for example, the notion of an afterlife, which Paracelsus finds himself unfit to clothe "in an intelligible dress of words" (4.681).

Paracelsus had begun his quest in the belief that he not only would find absolute truth but also would forge a new language that could express that truth; that is, he would read phenomena and record his reading in a fully novel fashion. But his failure leads him increasingly to an understanding of the necessity of "all helps" (4.239), both for the reading and the expression of it. This is suggested especially in the lyric that he presents as a parable (4.440-527). Mariners come to an island that they believe to be untrod by other men. They set to work building shrines for their stone statues, and, when done, inhabitants from neighboring isles arrive to invite them to bring their "majestic forms" to the other isles that offer far more appropriate shrines already built. The point is that the mariners discover that others have been before them offering even better means for the enshrinement of truth than they. All that they leave behind is a pile of stones to be discovered by future explorers, who may read the "tracings faint" and who are thus made to realize that they are readers and writers in a tradition. The priority that Paracelsus has previously claimed can be no more than a proud delusion. The way to knowledge is not "trackless," as in the beginning he believed, but covered with "tracings."
Paracelsus' acceptance of the idea of tradition and of the conventionality of language is underscored by his changing views on the nature of song. In the earlier parts of the poem, Paracelsus had held that poetry is essentially a private effusion. He speaks of Michal constantly in terms of her singing. He sees her as one who does “sing when all alone” (1. 642, 3. 36): if her song is heard at all, it is but overheard. Both Michal and Festus attempt to correct Paracelsus' false notion of her singing by pointing out that she does indeed sing to others (1. 642–44, 3. 37–38); but their words have no effect. Festus even ventures that lyric can be psychologically therapeutic insofar as it serves to relate the singer to the world outside himself (4. 546–47). Paracelsus' acceptance of this notion is suggested by the lyric “Heap cassia,” which he sings to make fun of himself, and by the lyric “Over the sea our galleys went,” which he employs to communicate his new understanding of tradition.

The result of Paracelsus' attempt to investigate all the ventures of life is tattered dress. Having earlier cultivated mind at the expense of body, he had grown prematurely old during the years between scenes one and two. Now having pleasured body to the extent of debauchery, he finds it no longer capable of sustaining mind. Yet as he speculated in the beginning, truth may emerge “in unused conjuncture” (1. 767). From the wreck of what he was, from a dislocation of the senses, he gains a new perspective. In scene five he hears the voices that Aprile also heard when dying, and he learns from them about science and philosophy what Aprile learned from them about poetry: namely, his inability or that of any man to probe “the inmost truth” and so “sink mankind / In uttermost despair” because they are left no more to do (5. 143–46). There will always be more to do and more to say; scientists and poets alike are always beginning, never ending, each providing in his end the point of departure for another. Each must try to find the sacred knowledge that Paracelsus quested for, and each must fail; yet the failure is success enough. It is the law of life that no man may preempt the race of its vitality by doing all there is to do or saying all there is to say.

As he prepares to reveal to Festus what he has learned from
the voices, he assumes again the role of the professor. "You are here to be instructed," he tells his friend (5.460). But he must rise from his couch—"why I ne'er lectured thus" (5.549)—and attire himself in all the trappings of the philosopher-king, which he has now become: "This couch shall be my throne: I bid this cell / Be consecrate; this wretched bed become / A shrine; for here God speaks to men through me!" (5.555–58).

What Paracelsus unfolds in his magnificent final monologue is a philosophy of becoming. Life spirals upward, and history is the record of plateaus reached and ascents begun therefrom. From God all being emanates, all power proceeds. For his own joy God sets in motion the evolutionary process culminating in man. The process does not end there, however, for in man begins the fresh evolution of power and love that will in some far-off time result in the perfection of man. But since "progress is / The law of life" (5.741–42), there will be a fresh development Godward, "in the eternal circle life pursues" (5.776). There is no telos other than the striving itself.

Paracelsus replaces the notion of being with that of becoming as the essence of reality. Thus his Romantic quest for "full consummation" (2.208) was misconceived: he could not find "the end" because in a state of becoming there is no such thing.18 And even when he modified his pursuit after the meeting with Aprile, his conception of it remained faulty. He began with the desire for Godlike power, but he learned from Aprile the worth of love and what proportion love should hold with power: that is, that love should precede power, desiring power to set it free, and that under such circumstance new power would always mean a growing access of love (5.856–59). But he failed to understand the dialectic of love and power as a dynamic process, characterized by temporary failure and regression as well as by success and progress. In a world of multitudinousness, the fertile abundance is constantly developing itself, by means of exhaustless energy, into new structures, or plateaus, of meaning. The present itself has "distinct and trembling beauty" when "seen / Beside its shadow" of the past (5.828–30). Hence what seems hate is but a mask of love, evil but the temporary eclipse of good:
To sympathize—be proud
Of [mankind's] half reasons, faint aspirings, struggles
Dimly for truth—their poorest fallacies,
And prejudice, and fears, and cares, and doubts:
All with a touch of nobleness, for all
Their error, all ambitious, upward tending,
Like plants in mines which never saw the sun,
But dream of him, and guess where he may be,
And do their best to climb and get to him.

(5. 875–83)

This is the perspective that Paracelsus should have taken but did not. The philosophy of becoming that he now embraces holds that the phenomenal world, abundant chaos, is “upward tending” in ever higher and higher spirals. As we shall see, this philosophy forms the basis of all the early works.

As Paracelsus now reads the phenomena of the world, he speaks, with “the fore-finger pointing,” “like one who traces in an open book / The matter he declares” (5. 531–33). He realizes that man writes himself into history, “imprints for ever / His presence on all lifeless things” (5. 718–19): the wind becomes “voices” of sorrow or gaiety, the pines transmit thoughts, the lily and the bird speak of things other than themselves—all help man “to ascertain his rank and final place” (5. 719–40). Such a reading of nature is part of man’s self-creation as man, and “what thus collected / He shall achieve, shall be set down to him” (5. 766–67). Man thus can read only what he writes.

Embracing the doctrine of becoming, Paracelsus is led to a new theory of language. Like man’s other faculties, attributes, and experiences, language is generative. Words evoke responses, which in turn act as stimuli; words are interanimating. Paracelsus regards this phenomenon in an evolutionary, developmental way: interanimation leads to new stages of linguistic ability where new things can be expressed. Words are not symbols mediating the noumenon and the phenomenon: they do not permit “vision,” as he had thought; rather, they are signs that allow man to gain a larger grasp on himself and thus grow in understanding beyond present verbal constructs,
"narrow creeds of right and wrong, which fade / Before unmeasur'd thirst for good" (5. 780–81). Hence Luther has led to a better understanding of Christianity, Erasmus to an appreciation of learning, Paracelsus to a new way of looking at the physical world.

As Paracelsus develops his linguistic theory, he shows that man deals with the world around him as language presents it to him. For language ties us to the world, especially language shaped as poetry. Poetry is the last defense of the mind against dream. "Speak on," Paracelsus says to Festus, "or I dream again. Speak on! / Some story, any thing . . / I shall dream else. Speak on!" (5. 415–17). Festus' lyric of the gliding River Main as an image of both continuity and change reattaches Paracelsus to real life: "My heart! they loose my heart, those simple words; / Its darkness passes, which nought else could expel." Festus' song "broke through / A chaos of ugly images" (5. 446–47, 450–51). It is through language that "in man's self arise / August anticipations, symbols, types / Of a dim splendour ever on before" (5. 773–75). Man writes himself and his beliefs. To this extent "truth is within ourselves" as Paracelsus claimed at the beginning (1. 726). History, or philosophy, thus consists of restatements of what is already known, as in this poem, where scene five is a restatement in evolutionary terms of what is set down in scene one in metaphysical language.

Paracelsus is not, however, a logical positivist; he does not accept the permanent separation of the finite and the infinite. Language has its limitations in that it cannot speak of the noumenal. But man is granted spiritual intuition, which is nonverbal—

a vast perception unexpress'd,
Uncomprehended by our narrow thought,
But somehow felt and known in every shift
And change in the spirit.

(5. 637–40)

No, spiritual insight cannot be expressed in words. That is why Paracelsus cannot tell Festus what he sees as he sets foot on the threshold of new and "boundless life" (5. 499–507).
And to the dying philosopher, this is as things should be. For the knowledge attained by Paracelsus in his final hour would, if granted earlier, have rendered his life meaningless. There would have been no more to do, for him or for others.

Though Paracelsus admits the misconception of his quest, he nevertheless is not guilty of false modesty about himself and his achievements. He insists on a starring role in the drama called Paracelsus right to the very end. He is a heroic redeemer “amid the half-form’d creatures round, / Whom [he] should save” (5. 784–85). They have rejected him and speak scornfully of him—and this is proper because the earth is never ready for its saviors—but this is only for a time: “I press God’s lamp / Close to my breast—its splendour, soon or late, / Will pierce the gloom” (5. 900–902). Paracelsus will surely be a “star” forever. As he dies, the enlightened Festus, who had earlier in scene five already acclaimed him both a king and star, steps forward, like a chorus, to bring to an end the drama that the hero has just enacted and say: “And this was Paracelsus!”

At the close we see more than ever that Paracelsus’ awareness of playing a role yields an ironic dimension to the poem that is the dramatization of his life, giving us as spectators two different and conflicting views of the action. For the protagonist’s sense of role-playing does not permit us to view the poem or the hero other than ambiguously and paradoxically. As the actor, Paracelsus insists that “God speaks to men through me!” (5. 557), yet he also insists that man writes his own script. This, of course, is a contradiction, and Browning has been charged with the inconsistency as a defect in the poem. But it is precisely the point of the poem that it presents two contradictory views of man and of language: a contradiction reflected in the very structure of the work.

It is frequently said that Browning turned to the dramatic mode for Paracelsus in reaction to the criticism made of the subjective, lyric nature of Pauline. But it seems clear to me that he chose a dramatic model for his poem because he wanted to show his hero self-consciously playing a role in a play called Paracelsus, after himself. “And this was Paracelsus!” as Festus says in the last line, meaning this was the way
that Paracelsus acted out his script. For the display of that life, Browning, naturally enough, chose the dramatic mode. He was at pains to insist in his prefatory remarks, as I have noted, that he had “endeavoured to write a poem, not a drama” and that the poem should not be judged by “the canons of the drama.” But he did follow a dramatic model in having Paracelsus’ life unfold in five parts, which he pointedly did not call acts. Its action is different from that of a five-act tragedy, however, in that there is a general falling action in the three middle parts. The imagery, reflecting the course of Paracelsus’ quest, helps structure the poem. The abundant light imagery of scene one in which “Aureole” tells his plans is dimmed in scene two to that of a gulf illumined only from its own depths (2. 175–76), in three to that of a sky of “heavy darkness / Diluted; grey and clear without the stars” (3. 1032–33), in four to the near total darkness of the grave (4. 359). In part five the light returns in celestial brightness transfiguring the death bed/tomb of the dying Paracelsus. The metaphor of plunging begins at the end of scene one with the hero’s declaration “I plunge” (1. 832); is carried through two, where he has “sunk insensibly so deep” to “a dead gulf” (2. 80, 175); continues in three, where he compares himself to a “fallen prince” who has suffered “degradation” (3. 222, 783); drops to a nadir in four, where the protagonist declares, “I should be sad / To live contented after such a fall” (4. 416–17); and ends in five with his plunging to new perceptions in death from which he “shall emerge one day” (5. 500, 901).

Within the overall parabolic movement of the poem, there are two parallel sections separated by a middle. This is indicated by the titles of the five scenes:

1. Paracelsus Aspires  
2. Paracelsus Attains  
3. Paracelsus  
4. Paracelsus Aspires  
5. Paracelsus Attains

As an earlier critic has shown, the pattern is ironic, which is to say, initially false attainment follows true aspiration and ends with true attainment subsequent to false aspirations, scene
three depicting the protagonist at rest, neither aspiring nor attaining.21

If we perceive the structure of the poem only in this way—that is, as full closure—I believe that we limit our apprec­iation of its ironic richness. Read only as the story of the pro­tagonist’s true attainment coming at the end of a life of ill-conceived aspiration and false attainment, the poem is an example of the irony of fate: the hero learns the truth of his quest only when it is too late to act on it. One point the poem makes over and over is that knowledge, which is power, is to be most valued when it can be displayed as love—that is, put to good use for oneself in the service of others. Ironically Para­celsus attains to an understanding of the role of power only when he is near death. But it is an equally important point of the poem that truth in the phenomenal world is a matter of changing apprehensions of it:

so in man’s self arise
August anticipations, symbols, types
Of a dim splendour ever on before,
In the eternal circle life pursues.
(5. 773–76)

Hence in this poem expounding the doctrine of becoming, which teaches that aspiration follows attainment, we are also invited to see its structure as circular:

1. Paracelsus Aspires
4. Paracelsus Aspires

At the center there is the self—or, in a larger sense, the con­glomerate self that is mankind—ever aspiring, attaining, aspir­ing, and so on. This structure is underscored by the pervasive imagery of expansion and contraction, beginning with Paracelsus’ invitation to Festus and Michal to “come closer” and end­ing with his dying “hand in hand” with Festus-Aprile.

What are we then left with in this poem of two structures? Is it simply the irony of double vision, an undefining irony? I
do not think so. For in the case of Paracelsus, unlike that of Pauline, we have still another perspective, indeed two more perspectives that modify and define the irony of the double perspective—those of the author and of history. Browning himself provides us with a note to the poem. "The liberties I have taken with my subject are very trifling; and the reader may slip the foregoing scenes between the leaves of any memoir he pleases, by way of commentary," he says, and then gives us his translation of an account of Paracelsus taken from the *Biographie Universelle*, together with his notes on that account. The point of his notes is to show us that, for all the liberties he has taken with the life of Paracelsus, the author has made use of a historical personage for his poem, that meaning is developed by reference to history rather than to consciousness.22 By the note and its insistence on history, Browning modifies both the parabolic and circular structures to figure a spiral. The attainment of the protagonist in scene five is not merely an end in itself, nor is it merely a restatement of the quest articulated in scene one and thus a growth of consciousness. What Paracelsus the historical scientist attains is an advance for the race, a new stage in progress from which a new, more advanced beginning may be made. Questing is valuable not only for the quester but also for mankind in its ascent upward. Because of Paracelsus, "the father of modern chymistry" and the discoverer of "the circulation of the blood and the sanguification of the heart," and so on (as the notes relate), the world was changed: the past was modified and the future opened for still further evolutionary advance. Locating his poem in time—every scene is given a date—Browning seeks to define the irony that his double structures offer.

Yet in defining his irony he was not negating it. What we are left with in the end is the multitudinousness, the abundant chaos of life. Paracelsus was a magician as well as a scientist; what he discovered was wrapped in the most appalling vesture. Any system, the poet would have us see, is only an approximation—an "august anticipation"—that must ultimately be rejected so as to begin again. A philosophy which postulates that an ending is also a beginning is obviously paradoxical and ironic—a philosophy of contradictions. Browning's is conse-
quently a philosophical irony that embraces both a creative and a de-creative activity.

The work of art informed by this philosophical irony moves back and forth between enthusiastic creation of a system or fiction and skeptical de-creation of it when as "truth" or mimesis it is subjected to scrutiny. In its dialectic, discontinuous movement, it reflects the fertile chaos of life-as-becoming. Browning was well aware that such a work is not easily understood. That is why in his prefatory remarks to *Paracelsus* he insisted "that a work like mine depends more immediately on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success—indeed were my scenes stars it must be his co-operating fancy which, supplying all chasms, shall connect the scattered lights into one constellation—a Lyre or a Crown." In the work of ironic discontinuity, the reader must join in the process of creation. As we shall see, the demand is to be made more strongly in the works to follow.

*Paracelsus* is magnificent in conception. It suffers, however, from its length, although it is significantly shorter than Henry Taylor's dramatic poem *Philip van Artevelde*, which had taken the literary world by storm when it appeared the previous year. In style *Paracelsus* lacks the dramatic conciseness that was to become so characteristically Browningesque just a few years later. As for characters, neither Festus nor Michal is essential for the action, their function being, as I have said, to provide an audience to whom Paracelsus may reveal his thoughts and to serve as a stable moral center. Aprile is a mere device, though a necessary one; he is like a *deus ex machina*, but introduced not to resolve the problem as in Classical drama but to keep it going. It was to take several more years before Browning learned that he could dispense with all the customary accoutrements of drama in displaying the growth of the soul in dramatic poetry of lyrical intensity. *Paracelsus* proved, however, a *succès d'estime*, and for a number of years the title pages of Browning's new works bore the legend "By the Author of *Paracelsus*."

²³