BROWNING SEEMS TO HAVE WORKED ON Sordello for seven years, from 1833 to 1840. Both Paracelsus and Strafford appear to have been diversions from the composition of what he envisioned as his magnum opus. In a sense they, as well as Pauline, are building blocks for the long work and thus share a symbiotic relationship to it: they serve as glosses on, and are glossed by, Sordello. They are what is called in the note to Pauline “sketches” of the “genre” of the longer work. Sordello is, however, written in a more radically ironic mode; and before proceeding to examination of the poem itself, I should like to outline briefly the aesthetic context of the peculiar kind of irony called Romantic Irony.¹

The chief theorist of Romantic Irony, as well as of philosophical irony, was Friedrich Schlegel,² who insisted that the work of art represent the ontological process of becoming. The artist begins, objectively and mimetically, with the creation of a fiction or system; but then he questions it as an accurate representation of the chaos of change and in the act of doing so soon discovers that it is but a mere subjective construct of his own making, an inadequate and fragmentary exposition of infinite becoming, from which he recoils. Through reflection the artist is able to withdraw from his work, and then through irony he soars above it to hover between an enthusiastic self-creation and a skeptical self-negation, thereby escaping an imprisoning immanence and realizing self-transcendence. Hence, says Schlegel, artistic irony “is, as it were, the demonstration of infinity, of the universality, of the feeling for the universe.”³

As a representation of ontological becoming, ironic art—what Schlegel called Romantic poetry or Universalpoesie—takes all forms, modes, styles, and genres for its expression. Using fragments, differing perspectives, critical comments, disruptions of cause and effect, confessional inter-
polations, it mirrors the fertile chaos of life itself. Such poetry requires, furthermore, that its creator rise above the self that elaborates the fiction in which he is imaged to present his audience with another self, an aesthetic self hovering between the order of being and the chaos of becoming. Outwardly this poetry will resemble an arabesque, a fantastic interlacing of diverse and disparate elements, and will make the same impression as that created by the harlequin figure in comedia dell'arte, who both controls the plot and mocks the play, or by the parabasis of Greek comedy in which the author's spokesman interrupts the action of the play to address the audience directly on matters of concern to the author. Such poetry (which may be in prose or verse) "should portray itself with each of its portrayals; everywhere and at the same time, it should be poetry and the poetry of poetry" (Athenaeum Fragment No. 238).

The poet bears the same relation to his poem as God does to his creation. Each may be said to be both in and out the creation, immanent and transcendent. Just as God's purpose, according to orthodox Protestant theology, is to show forth his power and love in the cosmos, so the poet wishes to reveal his own microcosmic splendor, his own artistic power and love in relation to his literary work. In each case irony is involved. For what appears as complete objectivity on the part of God and the artist toward their creations is in fact and purpose merely a vehicle for something very personal and objective—namely, as a revelation of the personalities behind the creations. This state of Godlike self-division and self-consciousness that the poet enjoys is central to the whole concept of Romantic Irony.

I do not know how directly familiar Browning was with Schlegel, Tieck, and other theorists and practitioners of Romantic Irony. He studied German at the University of London; and his teacher, Ludwig von Mühlenfels, introduced him to modern German writers. Subsequently his "literary father," W. J. Fox, introduced him to German biblical scholarship. Moreover, his admiration of, and friendship with, Carlyle kept him abreast of recent trends in modern German literature. The poet himself said, in 1842, that he read German
“pretty well” and “tolerably” (Domett, pp. 49, 52). Mrs. Orr claimed, however, that Browning did not know German directly, “his bond of union with German philosophy” being “but the natural tendencies of his own mind”: “He resembles Hegel, Fichte, or Schelling, as the case may be, by the purely creative impulse which has met their thought” (Handbook, p. 4). Yet whatever his direct knowledge, Browning was able to keep in touch with German culture. *Paracelsus* is but the first of his works with a German setting and German characters.

*Sordello* is one of the chief examples of Romantic Irony in nineteenth-century English literature. How Browning came to cast *Sordello* in this difficult mode can perhaps best be understood by tracing its growth over the seven years of its composition.

The history of the genesis and composition of *Sordello* is, however, involved and depends on speculation in reconstructing it. Most commentators believe that there were four stages in the writing and thus four different versions of the poem. According to DeVane’s scheme (Handbook, pp. 72–85), the initial version, largely the subject matter of the printed first two books, traces the development of the young Sordello as a poet. This first stage, which includes little historical background, was interrupted by the writing of *Paracelsus*, which usurped much of its theme and method of developing it. The second period of composition presumably began after the completion of *Paracelsus*. In the preface to *Strafford*, Browning says that prior to writing the play he “had for some time been engaged in a Poem of a very different nature”; and in the advertisement there is the announcement “Nearly ready. Sordello, in Six Books.” Then in July 1837 appeared a long poem by Mrs. W. Busk entitled *Sordello* on the same subject and somewhat in the same manner. Browning now felt it incumbent upon him to revise his poem, which apparently was almost ready for publication and which in this second version developed the post-Goito period of Sordello’s life by treating of his passionate love for Palma and his military exploits in medieval Italy.

The third version seems to have developed the historical background in great detail. Harriet Martineau recorded in her diary for 23 December 1837: “Browning called. ‘Sordello’ will
soon be done now. Denies himself preface and notes. He must choose between being historian or poet. Cannot split interest. I advised him to let the poem tell its own tale” (DeVane, Hand­book, p. 78). Finding himself at an impasse, Browning decided, as he wrote to a friend, to visit Italy “to finish my poem among the scenes it describes” (Orr, Life, p. 95). In Italy he experienced the kind of “conversion” described in the last part of book three of the completed Sordello: feeling intensely for the plight of suffering humanity he views in Venice, he comes to realize that he does not require chiefs and bards and princesses as the subjects of his poem but will henceforth champion ordinary men and women.

With redirected aim he began the final stage of composition upon his return home. This fourth version introduces most of the material of the last three books: Salinguerra, Sordello’s hidden relationship to him, the struggle between Guelf and Ghibellin and Sordello’s championing of the Guelf cause as the cause of the people. It was published in March 1840, at the expense of the poet’s father.

If this reconstruction in meagerest outline of the composi­tion of Sordello is anywhere near accurate, we see that when he sat down to begin the writing of the final version Browning was faced with fragments from three prior versions, each conflict­ing with, and often contradicting, the other. Not only were aims and intentions at war with each other but also the concep­tion of characters and their roles was vastly changed—Palma, for example, who was earlier the romantic heroine and was now to be displaced by female waifs in Saint Mark’s Square in Venice. The material was plainly intractable. Some of Browning’s earlier difficulty is indicated in the pref­ace to Strafford, where he states that he had undertaken the play out of “eagerness to freshen a jaded mind.” And this was in April 1837! What must his attitude toward his poem have been in the second half of 1838 when he had revised his inten­tions at least twice since? How, he must have asked himself, could all this inchoate mass of material be somehow trans­formed and transmuted into a harmonious union? The answer is that it could not be. And once Browning accepted this as the answer, he sat down and wrote the approximately 5,800
lines of rhyming iambic pentameter couplets with such dispatch that he seems to have almost concluded it in 1839 while also working on other projects.

As he looked back on *Paracelsus*, he doubtless reflected on the doctrine of becoming enunciated in the last scene, and it occurred to him that in a state of becoming the principle of non-contradiction is not applicable. For anything can be both itself and not itself at any specific moment, it being in process of becoming something else. This meant that he could include all the different versions of *Sordello*. Why, for instance, could not Palma be both "passion's votaress" (5. 998) and the instigator of Sordello's turn to social action? Why could not Sordello himself be both poet-dreamer and political activist?

But presuming he was bold enough to write a poem composed of such disparate and contradictory material, how could he organize it? Such unity as it had lay only in his experience of it. This being true, he would have to step into his work so as to show not only that it was *his* poem but also that it was his experience of his poem.

Who will, may hear Sordello's story told:

*His* story? Who believes *me* shall behold
The man, pursue his fortunes to the end
Like *me*; . .
Only believe *me*.

(1. 1–4, 10; italics added)

But what kind of poem would it be, what its genre? All conventional forms and genres would be but restrictions and obstructions. What was needed was some means of reproducing the infiniteness of life and also of penetrating to the very heart of the individual, some way of cramming in everything so that the work could be a mirror of the surrounding world yet also express the reflection of the poet upon the objects he represents. In effect it would have to be what Friedrich Schlegel called *Universalpoesie*:

Its mission is not merely to reunite all separate genres of poetry and to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It will,
and should, now mingle and now amalgamate poetry and prose, genius and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature, render poetry living and social, and life and society poetic, poetize wit, fill and saturate the forms of art with solid cultural material of every kind, and inspire them with vibrations of humor. It embraces everything poetic, from the greatest system of art which, in turn, includes many systems, down to the sigh, the kiss, which the mus­ing child breathes forth in artless song. It can lose itself in what it represents to such a degreee that one might think its one and only goal were the characterization of poetic individuals of every type; and yet no form has thus far arisen appropriate to expressing the author's mind so perfectly, so that artists who just wanted to write... have by coincidence described themselves. [This] poetry alone can, like the epic, become a mirror of the entire surrounding world, a picture of its age. And, it too can soar, free from all real and ideal interests, on the wings of poetic reflection, midway between the work and the artist. It can even exponentiate this reflection and multiply it as in an endless series of mirrors.... Other types of poetry are completed and can now be entirely ana­lyzed. [This new] type of poetry is still becoming; indeed, its pecu­liar essence is that it is always becoming and that it can never be completed.... [As] its first law it recognizes that the arbitrariness of the poet endures no law above himself. [This] genre of poetry is the only one which is more than a genre, and which is, as it were poetry itself.... (Athaeneum Fragment No. 116)

As for mode, since the poet was to be present in the poem it could not be purely dramatic as he might prefer and as was his previous practice.

Never
Of my own choice had this [method]... served to tell
A story I could body forth so well
By making speak, myself kept out of view
The very man as he was wont to do,
And leaving you to say the rest for him.

(1. 11–17)

No, it could not be purely dramatic. Since it was to recount the fortunes of Sordello, it would have to be some form of fic­tional narrative. But any conventional form of verse narr­ative—the verse romance in the manner of Scott, for exam­ple—would not serve because it did not permit the open
presence of the writer and of his response to his work. No, it would have to be something more nearly like the novel, already in the 1830s the most popular form of literature. But the novels of the period were not adequate models. What was needed was something more nearly like the roman, which the German critics spoke so highly of—an "arabesque" permitting both "objectivity and subjectivity," "symmetry and chaos," something that was an "artistically arranged confusion," a "charming symmetry of contradictions." And where might an exemplar of this be found? In Don Quixote, which the Germans praised so highly and which Browning himself knew intimately: in it there is a pretense of historical objectivity that the author destroys upon the slightest occasion by interrupting the narrative with reflections upon himself, his work, his readers, and the society of his day. Yes, why not "a Quixotic attempt"?

for as the friendless people's friend
[Don Quixote]
Spied from his hill-top once, despite the din
And dust of multitudes, Pentapolin
Named o' the Naked Arm, I single out
Sordello.

(1. 4–8)

Having arrived at such decisions concerning his work, Browning was now willing to embrace a more thoroughgoing irony than that manifested in Strafford. Adopting an irony that Schlegel characterized as permanent parabasis—which, it will be recalled, is the stepping forward of a chorus or actor to break the dramatic illusion and speak directly to the audience—Browning undertook a mode of composition that confounds and deconstructs the narrative order and determinable meaning that it pretends to offer. It was an ideal mode for one who wished to be both "objective" and "subjective."

The manner of narration has proved puzzling to most commentators on the poem, mainly because, not perceiving its essential ironic nature, they have tried to fit it into one particular kind of generic mould. Sordello is not merely a novel or a
puppet show or a diorama: it is all these things and more. In fact, the narrator at the beginning draws our attention to his several stances for the presentation of his story. First, as an illusionist, with his repeated command “appear, / Verona!” Then as a painter (or tailor?) who “chalk[s] broadly on each vesture’s hem / The wearer’s quality” (1.28–29). Then as a clown–stage-manager in commedia dell’ arte who “take[s] his stand / Motley on back and pointing-pole in hand / Beside them” (1.29–31). Then as storyteller to an imaginary audience: “I face ye, friends, / Summoned together . . . / To hear the story I propose to tell” (1.31–34). Such a variety of narrative poses is necessary for one who would be among “setters–forth of unexampled themes, / Makers of quite new men” (1.26–27).

Whatever his pose, the narrator is not simply a fictional presence distinct from the poet: he is that, but he is the poet also.16 Browning exploits the perpetual discrepancy in narrative between author and narrator and, as we shall see, between narrator and character in indirect discourse for his own personal ends. Browning actually appears recognizably in the poem in book two when he refers to his own May birthdate (296–97), and in book three when he speaks of himself musing on palace steps in Venice (676–77) and finishes with apostrophes to Walter Savage Landor and Fanny Haworth (950–74).17 Yet there is never any assurance that the narrator speaks with the full authority of the poet; indeed, the ambiguity as to the exact degree of identity between the poet’s empirical self and his aesthetic self, the narrator, is carefully maintained throughout.

Browning does this for at least two reasons. He had chosen as the protagonist of his work a historical figure—Sordello, the poet troubadour of the thirteenth-century—and proposed an imaginative reconstruction of his life—not as in the case of Paracelsus, where the historical figure is little rooted in Renaissance soil, but this time a protagonist surrounded by a background so rich in historical detail that he would seem to have stepped forth from some late medieval chronicle, “the very man as he was wont to do” (1.16). His narrative would be presented as if it were fact. Yet the more he worked on the
poem, the more he discovered that “the very man” was irre-coverable. At best he could produce only an approximation of the historical Sordello: not “the very man” but one “of quite new men” (1. 27). He would then have to admit the difficulty of presenting the poem as if it were history. To put it another way, given his announced intention, he would have to admit to the difficulty of writing the poem—and this is where his narrator’s role becomes important. We discover this early in the work. For the narrator has some trouble even getting his story started. “I single out / Sordello” he says, soon thereafter to beg his audience: “Only believe me. Ye believe?” Then “Appears / Verona.” But Verona does not appear at all; what occurs are some reasons for telling his story in such and such a manner. Then a second time comes the command “appear, / Verona!” (59–60), which proves to be another false start. Finally, on the third try, “appears / Verona” (77–78), but Sordello does not enter till line 328, whereupon Verona disappears, to be followed by a flashback to Sordello’s youth in Goito: “I would do this! if I should falter now” (373). This flashback lasts for some 2,000 lines, when “appears Verona!” (3.261), soon to be followed by a digression lasting till the close of book three and the promise that “you shall hear Sordello’s story told.” This faltering manner of narration continues to the last book, where, for example, the narrator says, “One word to end!” (6. 589) and then continues for nearly three hundred lines. In sum, the narrator haltingly unwinds not only the story he seeks to tell but also the means by which he seeks to tell it. Thus the metapoetry, the continual commentary on the poem’s own means and ends, is almost inextricable from the actual presentation. It is the narrator’s role to be the metapoet and hence to leave the poet free for higher things.

But this is only partially true. For in the process of writing the poem, the poet discovers that, in art at any rate, ends and means are inseparable, the process part of the product, the metapoetry inextricably interwound with the poetry. This is the discovery related, as we shall see, in book three, when having got his narrator ready at last to tell Sordello’s story, the poet finds that the narrator-distinct-from-poet cannot proceed:
ends and means, narrator and poet have to be brought into clearer (if not closer) relationship.

The examination of his art begins playfully enough when the narrator asks his audience for their approval of what has been accomplished thus far: “Nor slight too much my rhymes—‘that spring, dispread, / Dispart, disperse, lingering overhead / Like an escape of angels’” (593–95), using the same words to characterize his own verse as those used earlier to characterize Sordello’s earliest “dream performances” (1. 881–83). But no, his verse is more than “angelic”: it is more like a “transcendental platan” of pyrotechnical brilliance written by an “archmage” for the amusement of his audience from whom he is totally “apart” (595–607). But no again: he is, rather, like a god who comes and goes in his creation. Hence he will “entrance” his audience and godlike depart from his work, with the intention of later “returning into it without a break / I the consciousness.” Thus the narrator leaves the poem to become the poet: “They [his audience] sleep, and I awake / O’er the lagune [at Venice]” (607–15).

Only in those older, unselfconscious works of art where the poet believes himself achieving all there is to be achieved are the singer and his song one: there is no need for a narrator who is other than the poet. But in more modern and ambitious works where the self-conscious poet aims for more than can be achieved, there is always some indication that the poet possesses more energy and personality than can be encompassed by the work itself. It is in such poems as these that the question of the relationship between the poet and his narrator and, further, between the poet and his audience arises. With works like the former, the audience is totally satisfied by the completeness of the work itself; in the case of the latter, the audience asks the poet for more, for “another lay” into which he compresses “his whole life’s business” (3. 616–51).

But alas, such works are but “dream-performances that will / Be never more than dream” (3. 623–24). For the poet is like a sailor who pulls into harbor and tells his story to those on shore. He manages to enthrall his audience, but he also keeps them constantly mindful that he is the narrator, that he and his story are not one:
on we went
Till...may that beetle (shake your cap) attest
The springing of a land-wind from the West!

Then the sailor departs: “we and you / Part company: no other may pursue / Eastward your voyage, be informed what fate / Intends” (3.652–75). No, the self-conscious poet remains eternally faced with the irony that the teller of the tale is different from the person who lived the tale, even though that person be the teller himself. Self-conscious narrative, in other words, is linear and does not admit of that “compression” which allows the poem, the poet, and the narrator to be totally one.

Engrossed by his speculations, the poet asks why he should continue in such vein, why get on with his narrative when it will not yield what he wants from it. As he muses thus on a palace step in Venice, his eye is caught by a group of picturesque market girls and he is led to ask for the oppressed ones of the world what these girls now have—youth, strength, and health—opportunity, in a word, rather than the full physical and spiritual attainment that, utopia-minded, he had wished for them in England (3.676–721). And this new social awareness on his part leads him to consider his art in much the same way: he cannot at once achieve artistic perfection—the full compression that earlier he had lamented being unable to attain—but he does possess the opportunity to work toward it. His art is like a machine in the process of being built and not to be despised because it has not yet been completed, although he may have to endure opprobrium and epithets flung at him. He will simply have to tolerate a narrative in which there remains some distance between himself and his narrator. So occupied, he will strive to impart the gift of seeing to his audience; and though admitting to the impossibility of revivifying the historical Sordello, “the very man as he was wont to do,” he now in a more confident mood returns to his neglected auditors to say: “and therefore have I moulded, made anew / A Man, delivered to be turned and tried, / Be angry with or pleased at” (934–36). Thereafter, in the last three books, the narrative proceeds less haltingly and with little of the uneasi-
ness about the narrator's role reflected in books one through three.

Having accepted parabasis as a necessary condition of his narrative and having come to terms with the necessary lack of congruity between poet and narrator, Browning was left with the problem of the poet-narrator's relationship to his protagonist. It doubtless occurred to the poet that if his relationship to his narrator was dialogic, there was perhaps no better way of proceeding than to make the relationship of the poet-narrator to the protagonist a dialogic one also. As we shall see, this mode of procedure, which becomes a structural principle, gives rise to theme and theme in turns plays into structure.

In the first book, which traces Sordello's growth to consciousness during his early years at Goito, the world is experienced from Sordello's point of view. Placing us at Goito, the narrator invites us

Pass within:
A maze of corridors,
Dusk winding-stairs, dim galleries got past,
You gain the inmost chambers.

(1. 389–92),

the invitation being not only into the castle but also into Sordello's mind. The boy does not speak, but the narrator relates what happened to him and how he responded to each experience as a child would: "On each full-fraught / Discovery brooding, blind at first to aught / Beyond its beauty" (1. 483–85); "he never could remember when / He dwelt not at Goito" (1. 604–6). At the same time, the narrator does not speak on the child's behalf but adds some comment (frequently sarcastic) on certain aspects of the boy's development:

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

(1. 580–84)
Fool, who spied the mark
Of leprosy upon him  ?

(1. 567–68)

Such remarks are addressed not only to the audience but to Sordello as well, as though the narrator were attempting to tug the boy into consciousness of the world about him and to an awareness of where during the formative stages of his life he went wrong. As an adolescent wrapped up in himself and living in a dream world, Sordello is allowed to speak in his own voice to express his hopes of being emperor and Apollo: "though I must abide / With dreams now, I may find a thorough vent / For all myself" (1. 832–34). At the end of book one occurs the event that, "breaking on Sordello's mixed content / Opened, like any flash that cures the blind, / The veritable business of mankind" (998–1000).

Sordello now a man, the narrator enters more directly into dialogue with him, sliding back and forth between the second and third person, as he projects the protagonist's thoughts by means of indirect discourse—"presently / He will be there—the proper You, at length." Or he addresses Sordello directly:

Dear monarch, I beseech,
Notice how lamentably wide a breach
Is here! discovering this  . .
So much the better for you.

(2. 415–20)

More and more Sordello takes on a separate life of his own.

The nature of the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist is, in the first three books especially, deliberately obfuscated, however, by the syntax and the punctuation, or lack of it, as in the following passage chosen at random:

Lacks
The crowd perceptions? painfully, it tacks
Together thoughts Sordello, needing such
Has rent perception into: it's [sic] to clutch
And reconstruct—his office to diffuse,
Destroy: as difficult obtain a Muse
In short, as be Apollo. For the rest,
E'en if some wondrous vehicle exprest
The whole dream, what impertinence in me
So to express it, who myself can be
The dream! nor, on the other hand, are those,
I sing to over-likely to suppose
A higher than the highest I present
Now, and they praise already: be content
Both parties, rather: they with the old verse,
And I with the old praise—far go, fare worse!
(2. 596–610)

In books two and three, the more Sordello takes on a life of his own and the more he is allowed to speak for himself, the more he is merged into the narrator. Yet in the last two books, there is a growing separation of the two. The narrator addresses him more often and more directly by name, as in the beginning of book five; and in the last book he apostrophizes, “Ah my Sordello, I this once befriend / And speak for you” (6. 590–91), as though he had not been doing that all the time. In the end the separation between narrator and protagonist is so great that the narrator loses sympathy for his hero and, in apparent perfect detachment from him, sums up Sordello thus: “a sorry farce / Such life is after all” (6. 849–50).

Now this dialogic mode of procedure suggests how the poet-narrator uses his protagonist and indeed the poem itself. By means of a persona, he traces something like his own development and then, having got to a certain point of self-knowledge and thus of a certain superiority over his material, he effectively separates himself from his hero, as in fact Browning had attempted to do in Pauline. In other words, he uses Sordello as a whipping boy, ascribing to his protagonist faults he discerns within himself. Here as elsewhere in the poem, there is that spiraling of “artistic reflection and beautiful self-mirroring” that Schlegel found so characteristic of Romantic Irony (Athenaeum Fragment No. 238).

The youthful years of both Sordello and the speaker of Pau-
line are remarkably similar, and Betty Miller correctly notes the resemblances between them and their creator. It appears that Browning, in his first version of Sordello at any rate, wished to rework the material of the earlier poem, this time however focusing mainly on the youth’s development as a poet. The speaker of Pauline had, of course, represented himself as a poet but had shown fairly limited interest in the poet’s chief tool—language. As Browning’s own interest in language and language theory grew—a concern strongly reflected, as we have seen, in Paracelsus and Strafford—the poet began to focus increasingly on that one subject.

The Pauline poet had hoped to become a world redeemer with words, like the Sun-treader, whose “words . . . seemed / A key to a new world” (414–15). Apparently he reckoned that if he had the right aspirations for mankind, then the words to move them would magically come unsought for, as to “one who has a right” (1014). As we noted, the Pauline poet fails because his “words are wild and weak” (904).

In Sordello, Browning again deals with one who would be a Shelleyan (but acknowledged) legislator of mankind. This time, however, the boy-who-would-be-bard is located at a point of cultural crisis where, willy-nilly, he must address himself to the question of language. “Born just now— / With the new century—beside the glow / And efflorescence out of barbarism” (1. 569–71), Sordello is faced with forging a new language for Italy out of the late Latin vernacular: “he slow rewrought / That Language, welding words into the crude / Mass from the new speech round him” (2. 575–77).

Growing up in the isolation of Goito, he lives mainly in fancy. Soon discovering that all external beauties take on value only insofar as he responds to them, Sordello projects himself into the phenomena of the world not only to endow them with life but also to confirm his own consciousness of himself as a personality. In addition, the more life he experiences in this imaginative manner, the greater “soul” he becomes; the more the self sends forth itself to attack and overcome the not-self, the larger self it becomes. Such a nature stands in constant need of something to work its will upon and challenges all life to elicit and enlarge itself; such a nature fancies itself capable
of growing to any height and, further, showing men with "more bounded wills" how they may follow. Thus believing itself "equal to all," such a nature is subject to thinking, like Aprile, the labor too large for life's scope or attempting, like Paracelsus, "to display completely here / The mastery another life should learn, / Thrusting in time eternity's concern" (1. 523–66). Belonging to this second class, Sordello looks around for the proper role by which to display his gifts and, after impersonation of, among others, the poet Eglamor and the emperor Frederick, he ultimately selects Apollo, as concentrating all excellence. Sordello might have continued living in fancy—though "restlessly at rest" because "hardly avail / Fancies to soothe him" (1. 966–67)—had he not one day wandered by accident farther away from Goito than usual and come upon a court of love near Mantua.

In the song contest Eglamor sings a song of Apollo, and Sordello, finding that he knows the song better, takes up Eglamor's names and time and place and reworks them into "the true lay with the true end" (2. 82). As "word made leap / Out word; rhyme—rhyme," so that "the lay could barely keep / Pace with the action visibly rushing past" (2. 85–87), Sordello learns that language is generative: "a discovery grew / Out of it all!" (2. 124–25). This is our first clue that the poet's-narrator's theory of language is based upon imagination, emotion, and reflexivity instead of upon the Cartesian concept of language as logically formed and clearly constructed.

Now chief minstrel in Mantua, Sordello faces up to his new role. He must "think now," whereas "hitherto / He had perceived" (2. 123–24). At Goito he had become aware of the world by perception, meaning abstract perception or idea or character as well as visual perception pure and simple. And during his Goito years, he dimly recognized that his "perceptions strange" (1. 629) must find "a thorough vent," "an instrument," a "body" for their expression if his soul were ever to "obtain its whole / Desire some day" (1. 833–37). In Mantua he soon discovers that pure lyric, "that happy vehicle" by which he had won acclaim, was not an adequate vehicle for expression of himself. Turning to other modes, mainly the alle-
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...gorical, he strives to find the proper means, but with no satisfaction. Then he turns to an examination of his province's form of the Latin language:

He left imagining, to try the stuff
That held the imaged thing and, let it writhe
Never so fiercely, scarce allowed a tithe
To reach the light—his Language... he sought
The cause, conceived a cure, and slow re-wrought
That Language, welding words into the crude
Mass from the new speech round him, till a rude
Armour was hammered out.

(2. 570-77)

With a new language at his command, he next attempts the dramatic mode, but again fails to do what he most wants: to create and to have so recognized by his audience something that is both expressive of himself and simultaneously distinct from himself. Sordello wants a vehicle embodying both "perception" and "thought." Perception, as we have noted, is abstract and inchoate, a flow of psychic energy. Thought, on the other hand, is rational cognition, the mind dealing analytically with phenomena and proceeding syllogistically from origins to goals. Sordello discovers that although language can express thought, it cannot, in his hands at least, be made to exhibit perception. The "armour" of language simply disintegrates, "because perceptions whole, like that he sought / To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought / As language." Language is the means by which perception moves to thought—hence "Thought may take Perception's place"—but it cannot re-present the perception that thought has usurped. Between the conception and the creation falls the shadow. Language is linear, susceptible to analysis of its parts, whereas perception, more nearly temporal than spatial, does not admit dissection. Language is the "mere presentment" of perception, "of the Whole / By Parts, the Simultaneous and the Sole / By the Successive and the Many" (2. 588-95). Ironically, language, the medium of poetry, can only express that which is least "poetic."
Unable to find the “wondrous vehicle” to manifest “the whole dream,” “to become Apollo” (2.601–3), Sordello decides that he had best give up poetry altogether. Anyway, “what impertinence in me” deficiently to express the dream “who myself can be / The dream!” (2.603–5). Sung melodies are sweet, but those unsung are sweeter still. Sordello returns to Goito, where

back rushed the dream, enwrapt
Him wholly. ’Twas Apollo now they lapped
Those mountains, not a pettish minstrel meant
To wear his soul away in discontent.

(2.959–62)

In his refuge at Goito, Sordello stoically accepts the fact that because he has been unable to forge a language unique to his own expressive need, his must be the language of silence. But he is restless because he still retains will and the need to manifest it. Then almost miraculously appears the opportunity when Palma summons him to Verona and a life of action. Having, as he believes, exhausted the resources of language, Sordello, like Rimbaud six centuries later, turns to deeds. Not language now but acts will be the “body” his soul requires.

As a would-be man of action, he comes to realize that “Thought is the soul of act” (5.567), unexpressed perceptions having no part to play in the world:

’Tis knowledge whither such perceptions tend,
They lose themselves in that, means to an end,
The Many Old producing some One New
A Last unlike the First.

(5.433–46)

Ultimately language is a social enterprise, the mind in the world. Those like Salinguerra and Naddo who are buckled to the world speak easily, but Sordello, ever mindful of himself as distinct from the rest of the world, speaks with difficulty. Only once, when “quite forgetting for the one time / Himself,” does speech come easily for him (5.468–69). Only an other can
make an individual aware of his linguistic potential by drawing words out of him.

This recognition of the essential dialogic nature of language leads Sordello on to a theory of poetry as a dialogic art, about which I shall have more to say later. In the type of poetry that Sordello foresees, there is a dialogic interchange between the poet and his audience: “Yourselves effect what I was fain before / Effect, what I supplied yourselves suggest, / What I leave bare yourselves can now invest.” This is a poetry of non-statement. As Sordello had earlier discovered, a statement can delude by inadequately representing the utterer of that statement. A word, however, does not lie. And it is a poetry of words and not of statements that Sordello envisions: the language of his art of interchange being “brother’s speech”—“half-words,” no “explicit details,” calling things by “half-names,” speech “where an accent’s change gives each / The other’s soul” (5.622–37). Sordello realizes that poetry must of course be language and must function somewhat like discourse, but it need be “no speech to understand / By former audience” (5.637–38), need not in fact be even rational or reasonable.

This language of suggestiveness and spareness will permit an art in which more can be said than ever before in so compressed a space and time. Always, however, perception will require the mediation of thought, the whole must yield to the parts, the simultaneous must suffer transformation into the linear if they are to find verbal expression.20 Language can never describe consciousness, which is primarily apernal. Even in poetry there can never be metaphors whose first terms are inexpressible. The poet must simply accept this as a condition of his art, “stoop contented to express / No tithe of what’s to say—the vehicle / Never sufficient” (5.652–54). As we first noted in Paracelsus, for Browning language can never express the truth, which, in a state of becoming, is ever in advance of any formulation of it.

Some of Sordello’s thoughts on language are amplifications of the brief reflections on the matter in the personal digression in book three. The poet-narrator comes to understand language in other than Cartesian terms: that is, not merely as an
expression of mental and emotional content of which a speaker is consciously aware. Men rationalize, justify, apologize for themselves and their actions, but in doing so they reveal more about themselves and their motives than they intend (3. 787–802). By its failure as mimesis, the "betrayal" of language becomes a dramatic narrative device. Furthermore, language can be its own stimulus: men can come to believe in what they say just because they are speaking. The dramatic possibilities of these discoveries are unfolded in Sordello's long, casuistical interior monologue in book six, in which he considers accepting the badge flung on him by Salinguerra. The essential dialogic nature of language is at the heart of both the poet-narrator's and Sordello's linguistic theory.

Their thoughts on language, of course, govern in part their aesthetic theory. If language is indeed a social enterprise, then all notions of the poet as a Romantic bard must be called into question. As we noted in an earlier chapter, John Stuart Mill carried Romantic ideas of poetry to their logical conclusion when, in his essay "What is Poetry?" published in the Monthly Repository for January 1833, he said that all poetry worthy of the name is lyric in mode, the singer singing to himself. "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy," he remarked; "eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener." As we saw, Browning examined such ideas in Pauline and Paracelsus, yet although Pauline's lover and Paracelsus do speak to someone, with the exception of the encounter with Aprile, who actually is not listened to, the auditors merely provide the dramatic occasion; there is no interchange, no true dialogue. And even in Strafford the characters' speech is very little conformed by the audience or the setting. This was why William Bell Scott found that the speakers had only orations to deliver. However, as Browning looked further into the nature of language, he became increasingly aware of the extent to which the human being is a linguistic animal: how character is, to no small degree, the product of language. In his work on Sordello, he was concerned to investigate the question more profoundly.

From his acquaintance with Italian literature of the early
Renaissance and from his wide reading of English and French poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Ronsard, Donne, Butler—Browning was aware of how the old poetic tradition had socialized the poet. As Walter Ong observes, this tradition associated with rhetoric “had kept the poet engaged, struggling, not only with an audience but with other poets as well... Contest, ceremonial polemic, was a constitutive element in the noetic organization of the old preromantic rhetorical world and of the poetic this world enfolded.” These earlier poets seemed to know instinctively what Browning had but recently discovered—namely, that language is a social enterprise. Would it be possible to return poetry to its dialogic inheritance? To pursue the matter there could be no better way than to take for his subject a troubadour, a poet in constant contact with his audience and other poets. Such a choice would certainly prove a means for the working out of that very vexing modern problem—the relationship between the artist and his audience. It was to be the way that Wagner chose only a few years later, in Tannhäuser and Die Meistersinger.

For his protagonist Browning selected the historical poet-troubadour known mainly as the precursor of Dante. He aimed to reclaim the figure from the “hateful surge” and the “abyssal past” (1. 19) and also “disentwine” the “herald-star” from Dante’s “consummate orb” (1. 350–61), thus deriving his hero from two different sources—history and imagination—and thereby allowing for a dialectical interplay from the very beginning. We soon see this reflected in Sordello during the Goito years: he lives physically in the world but mentally and emotionally in fancy, a luminous presence in a numinous world. Sordello is, however, of such disposition that he cannot belong to what he worships but must refer all qualities back to himself: “So homage other souls direct / Without, turns inward” and, requiring grist for his mill as well as confirmation of the process, he “must ever live before a crowd” (1. 535–36, 746). The crowds on whom Sordello is to work his will are necessarily all imaginary—and being imaginary they are no more or no less than reflections of himself and thus unable to be affected by his will.

At the court of love, he stands up after Eglamor finishes his
song and “taking the other’s names and time and place / For his” (2. 83–84), is enabled to excel. This is a dialogue by contest—the tenson (at which the historical Sordello outstripped his contemporaries) being an example of it—and it is the first instance of dialogue of any kind that he has experienced. Yet the immediate result of this is to encourage the notion that he is different from, and indeed superior to, other men. As the reincarnation of Apollo, he would be the heroic redeemer of other men. But as to the means by which he will do this, no matter: “Himself, inactive, yet is greater far / Than such as act, each stooping to his star, / Acquiring then his function” (2. 381–83). At this stage all dialogue has ceased: what he should be drawing from others, he would have them draw from him; yet since he does not love, such love as others should have in him does not exist.

In time Sordello settles on song—“Song, not Deeds, / (For we get tired)”—as the “channel to dispense / His own volition” (2. 440–44). Although he is proclaimed a bard, song itself soon becomes a sore annoyance because, singing not to communicate the joy of song itself but to have an effect, he finds that his audience does not respond as he would have them do. Although he loves the crowd’s applause, he is nevertheless aware that they do not understand his intentions, caring only for the product and not the maker of it:

he found that every time
He gained applause by any given rhyme
His auditory recognised no jot
As he intended, and, mistaking not
Him for his meanest hero, ne’er was dunce
Sufficient to believe him—All at once.
His Will...conceive it caring for his Will!

(2. 621–27)

There is no interchange between him and his audience at all.

It is at just this time, however, that Sordello is most regarded as a bard. Having assumed the bardic crown of Eglamor, he is universally applauded but most of all by the critic-friend Naddo, who assures him that he is “true bard”
(2. 497). When Sordello begins to doubt his vocation, Naddo reassures him that as “a bard, a bard past doubt” (2. 788), he should cast aside all notions of introducing philosophic problems into his verse. Speak to the common heart, Naddo says, and hide all that sense of power that urges poetic genius to special ardor: “True bards believe / Us able to achieve what they achieve— / That is, just nothing.” Poetry makes nothing happen. “The knowledge that you are a bard / Must constitute your prime, nay sole, reward!” (2. 815–20).

Sordello is not comforted by such prattle. How, he ponders, can a young poet, having lived at far remove from the crowd and thus with little knowledge of it, arrive at sufficiently accurate knowledge of others so as to satisfy the demand of an audience—which wants to see its own image in art—and still maintain a solid and evolving sense of self? How make congruent an actual (as opposed to an imagined) crowd, one in whom the poet lives and moves and has his being, and an actual (as opposed to an imagined) self? How, in other words, to make man and bard one? The question is aesthetic and psychological but not, at this point in Sordello's life, moral. Finding no answer, “the complete Sordello, Man and Bard,” is “sundered in twain” (2. 690, 657) and, “foreswearing bard-craft” (2. 703), he soon returns to Goito, where, no longer Apollo, he continues to puzzle over the dilemma “to need become all natures yet retain / The law of one’s own nature—to remain / Oneself, yet yearn . . . ” (3. 39–41).

From Goito he is rescued by Naddo, who, “leaning over the lost bard’s shoulder” (3. 223), tells Sordello that he must leave his treasured refuge for the gauds and pomps of the city. Arriving in Verona, he resolves to become the people’s champion and take an active part in political events, thereupon ceasing to be a poet, “one round / Of life . . . quite accomplished” (3. 563–64), and leaving us with the impression that the problem of the poet-audience relationship admits no solution.

In book five we learn just how Sordello went wrong. First, he aimed to be a perfect poet—and there is no such thing: it was madness to believe he could be Apollo. Poetry is, like everything else, always in a state of becoming, new poets filling
the voids left by their predecessors, Sordellos replacing Eglamors. Second, Sordello's idea of himself as half man and half bard was erroneous. A poet is part of mankind, "nor one half may evade / The other half: our friends are half of you" (5.252-53). His fate being bound up with others, he must join with them to help the advancement of what formerly he had called "the crowd" toward an unrepressed and happy life. This means that he must shunt aside forever the idea of the poet as bard, one separated from his audience.

The opportunity to act on this new knowledge is soon granted. "Since talking is your trade," cries an inner voice, persuade Salinguerra to act on the people's behalf (5.300-301). His argument fails, however, because, putting his feelings into his speech as something apart from himself, he is too self-conscious and too aware of trying to make an effect. Recognizing his failure, Sordello sinks into despair. He is soon roused by Salinguerra's slighting reference to poets and poetry and rises to their defense, speaking as unselfconsciously as he had sung when besting Eglamor. As Sordello responds vigorously, he is aware of contest, of being watched and judged: "round those three the People formed a ring" to watch Sordello proved their lord "ere they exact / Amends for that lord's defalcation" (5.456, 466-67). It is he that has failed, not poetry, and his failure is primarily owing to two reasons. First, he worked with inherited forms, by which he could only copy nature, not shape it. Mimesis in art is but a means to an end, the end being enlargement and extension of "essence," of soul. Second, he had been at a monologic remove from his audience. Had he given his soul real sway, he, already embodying the life of the multitude, would have engaged in a true dialogic relationship and made himself part of the crowd, living in and with them. Had he done this, he would have attained a poetic power to be transmitted to a succeeding age and to be transcended by new poets. In the last analysis, it was the moral (and thus dialogic) aspect of art that he overlooked. He is now no longer merely willing to feed his own individuality but, instead, willing to contribute his part to mankind, whom, incidentally, he no longer refers to as "the crowd."

Looking back on his mistakes, Sordello discerns an evolu-
tionary scheme in the history of poetry and foresees a new kind of poetry embodying the dialogic process in a new way. Indeed, Sordello views literary history as increasing dialogue between the poet and his audience, or, perhaps more exactly, as the increasing role of the audience in the creation of the poem, the exercise of what in the preface to Paracelsus is called their “co-operating fancy.” In the beginning mankind’s deeds rose successively to the birth of song. Song in turn produced deeds and then “acts . . . for the mind” (5. 575). Next came poetry of a more sophisticated sort, that of the “epoist,” in which the poet displays men and women by exaggerating their good and bad qualities. This perfected, “Next age—what’s to do?” The dramatist, or “analyst,” shows without exaggeration how men and women act in circumstances provided for them. Lastly, the “synthetist” turns to display of man’s inner life. Each of those three phases of poetic art involves an increasing role for the audience to play—Sordello, in fact, refers to his run-through of literary history as a “masque”—so that in the art of the synthetist, poetry advances to full-fledged dialogue. Acting on the principle of complementarity, the poet casts “external things away” and “yourselves effect what I was fain before / Effect, what I supplied yourselves suggest, / What I leave bare yourselves can now invest.” Talking “as brothers talk”—in “brother’s speech, where an accent’s change gives each / The other’s soul”—the poet and his audience proceed by “a single touch more” or “a touch less” to effect an “all-transmuting” art (5. 584–650), in which they together more or less play the same role.

No longer is there any talk of “the bard” or “the crowd” but only of “brothers.” Tracing the history of poetry from the lyric through epic and drama, Sordello speaks of the poet’s role in making his audience see life as lived apparently and really. Not once is there mention of any one poet’s priority. To Sordello poetry is dialogue not only between the poet and his audience but also between him and his peers, who are “brothers” as well. All poets are engaged in the corporate enterprise of the ultimate unveiling of “the last of mysteries”—man’s inmost life—focusing on man in time, not on the disclosure of
divinity or on man in eternity. They work “stage by stage” in the advance:

Today
Takes in account the work of Yesterday—
Has not the world a Past now, its adept
Consults ere he dispense with or accept
New aids? .

ends
Accomplished turn to means: my art intends
New structure from the ancient.

(5.627–31, 641–43)

The brotherhood continues thus to work until, in their display of man and his psyche, they reach the stage where they “divest / Mind of e’en Thought, and, lo, God’s unexpressed / Will dawns above us” (5. 575–77). But this will occur only at the great unfolding of the Apocalypse because in time the poet “must stoop contented to express / No tithe of what’s to say” (5. 652–53). A poetics of dialogue can hardly go further.

Sordello’s aesthetic theory is reflective of the poet-narrator’s expressed in book three. At the beginning of the personal digression, the narrator discards all non-evolutionary views of poetry and with them any notion of poetic enclosure. Only in art like Eglamor’s is there to be found formal completeness. For Eglamor believed himself accomplishing all that a singer could accomplish: he fully embodied himself in his art so that singer and song were one. Eglamor is, in Schiller’s terms, a “naïve” poet who, representing the sensuous surface of life, “flees the heart that seeks him, the longing that wishes to embrace him. . . The object possesses him utterly ; he stands behind his work; he is himself the work, and the work is himself; a man must be no longer worthy of the work, or be incapable of mastering it, or be tired of it, even to ask after its author.” In book one the poet-narrator had spoken of this type in almost the same terms:

A need to blend with each external charm,
Bury themselves, the whole heart wide and warm,
In something not themselves; they would belong
To what they worship.

(1. 507–10)

Such a poet is "objective."

The other type of poet is, in Schiller’s terms again, "reflective." It
eagerly looks, too,
On beauty, but
Proclaims each new revealment born a twin
With a distinctest consciousness within
Referring still the quality, now first
Revealed, to their own soul.

(1. 523–28)

This "subjective" type cannot be fully embodied in art, always having something left over and giving the audience "proof" that "the singer’s proper life" exists underneath his song, that the song itself is but an episode in the poet’s life (3. 622–30). For such a poet formal closure—"completeness"—is out of the question, because more is suggested than can ever be produced. For such a poet there is always an imbalance between himself and his forms.

This is not at this point a consoling notion for the narrator, who reveals himself to be, like his Sordello, a poet of this second sort. He had set out to write a long poem, and if formal closure was more or less impossible for such as he, how was he ever to proceed to an appointed end? He had traced Sordello’s first thirty years in a flashback and had now got his hero to the point where he could act in the present. But what action? And how? Browning himself, as we saw earlier, had worked himself into an impasse and had decided to visit Italy “to finish my poem among the scenes it describes” (Orr, Life, p. 88). Musing on a step in Venice, he asks in the poem, “Who’s adorable / Enough reclaim a—... be a queen to me?” (3. 679–81). It is, as he had said on behalf of Sordello, “as difficult obtain a Muse / as be Apollo” (2. 600–601).

Looking for a queen, a muse of incompleteness and frag-
mentariness, he asks, why not take that *contadina* with the brown cheek? What "if I make / A queen of her, continue for her sake / Sordello's story?" (3. 689–91). Whereupon a "sad disheveled ghost," presumably the muse of the first part of the poem, comes "to pluck at me and point" and in effect says, "Get on with the show." To which the poet-narrator also in effect replies, "This is more or less part of the show," as his muse is transformed before his very eyes. Previously, under inspiration of his old muse, he had sought perfection for mankind. "At home we dizen scholars, chiefs and kings"—Paracelsus, Strafford, the young Sordello—"But in this magic weather hardly clings / The old garb gracefully" (3.719–23). Life is variegated, like Venice itself, made up of good and evil, healthy and sick, wealthy and poor. Hence he does not ask for perfection for mankind, only for so much happiness as possible, and hence he turns to a different muse. No longer a queen, this new muse is a poor waif of trembling thin lips and tear-shot eyes—"into one face / The many faces crowd"—whom he loves far more than "she I looked should foot Life's temple floor" in the preceding parts of the poem:

> for I regret  
> Little that she, whose early foot was set  
> Forth as she'd plant it on a pedestal,  
> Now . . . seems to fall  
> Towards me.  
> (3. 749–77)

Instead of awesome and distant, the new muse is more like a friend with whom there is a reciprocal relationship of service. The muse is no longer a goddess, and the poet is no longer a bard.

No, mankind is not to be despised even in its most seemingly depraved aspects, each having an idea of good that he uses to justify his seeming evil. This recognition of the mixture of good and evil in the world is but "a slight advance" (804) in the understanding of men, but at least it is better than what is offered by so-called bards from their poetic heights, who promise more than they deliver. Bards glibly talk of fountains in
the desert, "while awkwardly enough your Moses smites / The rock though he forego his Promised Land" (826–27).

Bards talk grandly of "office" without knowledge of what the term means. As the narrator understands it, "office" simply means doing what one is able to do to aid the human enterprise of living decently. Each is a cog in a machine, less valuable in itself than for what it can do. Poets "simply experiment / Each on the other's power" in building a "complex gin" of poetry, reaching completion of it at last and then watching it be dismantled by the next age. At present "this of ours [is] yet in probation" and "the scope of the whole engine's to be proved" (3. 837–54). The "office" of poets neither blind nor dumb has been, is, and will be of three separate kinds: the worst say they have seen; the better tell what it was they saw; the best impart the gift of seeing—apparently the lyric, narrative (epic), and dramatic modes. Having given this synoptic view of literary history and having offered examples of each, the poet-narrator speaks of yet a fourth kind of poetry. This type asks the audience to advance, "and having seen too what I saw, be bold / Enough encounter what I do behold / (That's sure) but you must take on trust!" (3. 912–15). This seems to be the art of the synthetist spoken of in greater detail in book five. At this point in the writing of his poem, however, Browning had not fully worked out the details of a poetics of dialogue, and only later did he realize or admit that the poet who casts off externals and makes "Natures, varied now, so decompose / That...Why, he writes Sordello" (5. 617–19).

Having spoken at some length about poetic theory, the poet-narrator now draws back hurriedly from appearing "bardic." After all, he had just been attacking bards and here he was seeming to talk like one. As Griffin and Minchin report, Browning "had a horror, carried almost to excess, of assuming anything like a bardic pose" (p. 286). Why burden anyone with reflections on the function of the poet? Quite rightly the crowd dispenses praise on Salinguerras in preference to Sordellos. These former may not see a great deal, but they turn their bit of vision into action. They at least do something without a lot of palaver. But that is the way the world is: only in
heaven will it be possible to see and act on that sight. Meanwhile, he who sees and causes others to see—\textit{"the Maker-see"}\textsuperscript{27}—does have a mighty role to play: to keep before men an awareness of Heaven's gifts.

Accepting the fact that for a "probational work" like the one he is engaged in there can be no sense of completeness such as "bards" achieve, the poet-narrator now feels free to present his poem as process rather than product: "The scope of the whole engine's to be proved" (849). What the result will be he does not know.

Assuming that the digression in book three is a reliable account of Browning's own thoughts and attitudes during his first Italian journey, let us again take note of some of the problems and decisions he faced upon returning home to complete \textit{Sordello}. First, his subject matter was changed. Where formerly Sordello was portrayed as knight and bard, he now was to be shown as a man of the people. Second, the change in subject meant a change in treatment. After apparently patterning his poem on an epic model, he now realized that epic or grand romance would not serve to depict the people's champion. The style, the mode, even the genre would have to be reconsidered. Third, his own ideas about his art had shifted. Poetry, he had come more and more to realize, means neither singing to oneself nor delivering divine commandments. It is dialogue and process, not ukase and product. Yet, being a linguistic entity, it does come to an end and yield a product. And as for dialogue, the poet, possessing profound insight and the ability to tell what he sees, is different from ordinary men, who, furthermore, are mostly uninterested in what the poet has to say. We see this reflected in the two metaphors at the end of book three: Hercules sacrificed upon an altar, Saint John departing for Patmos. If \textit{Sordello} were to be a reflection, it would also be a revelation. With, then, a changed subject matter and the consequent necessity to change style, plus an altered attitude toward his art, Browning decided, as we noticed at the beginning of this chapter, to step into the poem himself to present this disparate and contradictory material. He would "dance" as "Metaphysic Poet" (3. 829) and, employing a radical ironic mode, make it impossible to tell the dancer
from the dance. He would be both narrator and hero, and at the same time neither.

In later years also Browning would refer to *Sordello* as a "metaphysical" poem. By this I understand him to mean a correlation in the poem between various attributes and activities of man's spiritual and physical life. Perhaps the most evident of these is the implied correspondence between soul's body and artist's form. Just as artistic form is never adequate to enclose the artist's psychic energy, so is the physical body an imperfect manifestation of the soul. This disparity between aspiration and achievement is both a limitation and an opportunity—and this is precisely what Sordello never learns to accept and why in those parts of the poem dealing specifically with him there is an alternating imagery of contraction and expansion. When seeking a "body," "vent," "instrument," "vehicle," or "machine," he feels contracted and restrained; only as "soul" living in "dream" and "fancy" does he expand: upon returning to Goito, for example, "Back rushed the dream . . . heart and brain / Swelled; he expanded to himself again" (2. 959, 963–64).

Pleasant as the dream is, it is not, however, satisfying. Expansion and flight are exhilarating, but eventually one longs for firm ground. "Tis Joy when so much Soul is wreaked in Time." (6. 493). Lovers of beauty like Sordello are "blind at first to aught / Beyond its beauty," but eventually "exceeding love / Becomes an aching weight" and

> they are fain invest
> The lifeless thing with life from their own soul
> Availing it to purpose, to control,
> To dwell distinct and have peculiar joy
> And separate interests.

(1. 484–94)

It is, however, this "purpose" that Sordello lacks: he "loves not, nor possesses One / Idea that, star-like over, lures him on / To its exclusive purpose" (2. 396–97). And having no purposeful idea or center within himself, he must discover it in others. As Friedrich Schlegel says,
An artist is he who has his center within himself. He who lacks this must choose a particular leader and mediator outside of himself, not forever, however, but only at first. For man cannot exist without a living center, and if he does not have it within himself, he may seek it only in a human being. Only a human being and his center can stimulate and awaken that of another. (*Athenaeum* Fragment No. 45)

Possessed of a nineteenth-century sensibility (although dressed in medieval garb), Sordello quite naturally turns his fancy to thoughts of love. As we have noted, Browning in earlier works was concerned to work out for himself the meaning of human love. In *Pauline* the speaker had believed himself redeemed by romantic love. In *Paracelsus* it is domestic love (between Festus and Michal) that is pure and ennobling, although the protagonist does not experience it. In *Strafford* love is shown as a kind of madness. In the writing of *Sordello*, Browning was still working out his idea about love between men and women, and his changing thoughts on the subject are reflected in the poem, especially in the characterization of Palma.

In the beginning Sordello knows only the stone maidens of the font, who are his inspiration to high thoughts and the objects of his erotic fantasies. In adolescence “his votaries / Sunk to respectful distance” (1. 928–29) to be replaced by one who was to be Daphne to his Apollo—Palma. But he has seen her only at a distance, and only “conspicuous in his world / Of dreams sate Palma” (1. 947–48). One day, wandering fancifully in pursuit of Palma, he finds his dreams come true when he enters the court of love presided over by her. He sings and she awards him the prize—“Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily / Upon him, her neck’s warmth and all” (2. 104–5)—whereupon he falls into a deep swoon. Although appointed Palma’s chief minstrel, he apparently continues to see her only from afar, if at all. In Mantua he is unable without a muse to hammer out a tenable aesthetic and so returns to Goito, where he throws his minstrel’s crown into the font upheld by the caryatides. Having discovered neither a human love nor a human inspiration for his song, he once more embraces the silent stone maidens and gives up song altogether because he has no
idea or controlling purpose for his song. Unhappy and restless at Goito, pining subconsciously to mix with the world, he nevertheless can think of nowhere to go and nothing to do. He retains will but lacks the means for its exercise.

Then comes a summons from Palma to join her at Verona. Telling Sordello her story “with a coy fastidious grace / Like the bird’s flutter ere it fix and feed,” she says she too has had a need similar to his. At Goito she also had lived in dream, hers being of an “out-soul” that would lure from her her “force” and direct it and make it grow. This other was to determine for her every law of life; this other was to be nothing less than the incarnation (“corporeal shape”) of Divine Will. He for God, she for God in him. This instrument of Deity remained to be found till the song contest, when she knew then and there that Sordello, the boy from Goito whom she had already set her heart upon, was the one. She was sure of him, moreover, because “Men’s acknowledgment / Sanctioned her own” (3.306–58). She like Sordello must “ascertain / If others judge their claims not urged in vain” (1.742–43). Only unpropitious circumstances had prevented her from proclaiming her love for this “Fomalhaut” (3.430), a star associated with Venus, the planet of love.

All this sounds like a medieval, mystical view of love, and the high-blown sentiments expressed in semireligious language have convinced a number of commentators of the true nobility of Palma’s soul. Yet if we look closer, we discern that what she wants from Sordello is for him to be, as Porter and Clarke put it, “an instrument of her ambition,” Palma wishing to hold the same power that Adelaide, her stepmother, held. Telling Sordello her plans and how he can help her fulfill them, she asks “if I have misconceived / Your destiny, too readily believed / The Kaiser’s cause your own” (3.549–51).

Sordello does not reply. Up to this point he had barely heard of Guelfs and Ghibellins, much less known the difference between them. Heponderst all night and then, never questioning his ability as a politician or warrior,

resolves to be
Gatevein of this heart’s blood of Lombardy,
Soul to their body—have their aggregate
Of souls and bodies, and so conquer fate.

At last he has found the body for his soul, the means for self-display. No question of social good, merely self-fulfillment—this is the only concern “while our Sordello drank / The wisdom of that golden Palma” (3. 555–61, 585–86). As the allusion to Brennus following suggests (3. 588–92), all that glitters is not gold.

Some indication of the nature of Palma’s love for Sordello may be guessed from the fact that she knows the secret of Sordello’s birth but does not reveal it until Salinguerra throws the imperial badge around Sordello’s neck. It is indeed fortuitous that the much-needed out-soul, whom for years she has seen at a distance, is acclaimed only after her discovery of his noble birth. Just as Adelaide feared a son of Salinguerra because he might be like his father in prowess, so does Palma—who “would blend / With this magnific spirit [Adelaide] to the end” (5. 800–801)—want as her champion (and spouse) the son of her father’s chief general and adviser. And her disclosure of the mystery of Sordello’s parentage has the (desired) effect of Salinguerra’s insisting, “But only let Sordello Palma wed” (5. 932) so as to recoup the losses of her family.

And then the narrator does a very strange thing. After recounting Salinguerra’s plans for dominion over Italy, he interrupts to say parenthetically:

(Strange that...such confessions so should hap
To Palma Dante spoke with in the clear
Amorous silence of the Swooning-sphere,
Cunizza, as he called her! Never ask
Of Palma more! She sate, knowing her task
Was done, the labour of it—for success
Concerned not Palma, passion’s votaress.)

(5. 992–98)

In Paradiso (9. 25–36) Dante depicts Cunizza, whose amours, especially with Sordello, were notorious, but whose later life is
said to be adequate recompense for her sins. She was indeed "passion's votaress." But Palma (as Browning renames her)? Surely more connivance than passion in her case. From all that has gone before, we have every reason to believe that success concerned her a great deal. Are we then to believe that Palma is transformed by her love for Sordello? But "never ask / Of Palma more!" She is to be dropped from the story just as we are invited to see her in a different light. Yet as it turns out, she is not dropped at all; at least the narrator will have more to say and suggest about her.

In book six the narrator repeats his observation that natures like Sordello, lacking a center, need a controlling purpose to be supplied by something outside themselves: "a transcendent all-embracing sense / Demanding only outward influence, / A soul, in Palma's phase, above his soul" (6. 39–41). Sordello, alas, has never found it, or accepted it when offered. He has been one of those who shied away from "the food / That's offered them." Certainly "a Palma's Love" would not "equal prove / To swaying all Sordello," but this does not mean that there is no "Love meet for such a Strength" as he possesses (6. 85–92).

In his interior monologue in book six, Sordello tries to justify his unwillingness to accept what has been offered by way of love. If, say, he had embraced Palma as a worthy "Love," "influence," "moon," "out-soul," he would have been settling for something less than the best imaginable and that would have meant debasement of his own soul. Where then "descry the Love" that shall be sufficient to affect "all Sordello" (6. 585)? The narrator supplies an answer, but for this we shall wait. The point to be made here is that Palma's love does not prove redemptive.

As we have seen, the narrator appears to have changed his mind about Palma during the course of the poem, altering his characterization of her from an ambitious politician (or power-behind-the-throne) to a romantic lover, who as her last passionate act "prest / In one great kiss her lips upon his [Sordello's] breast" (6. 619–20). He does this, I believe, because after his Venetian experience he comes to a more informed awareness of the need for love and sympathy in human life.
In his own life Browning, even prior to 1838, had been working out the proper relationship of power and love. I say this because we have watched him in *Paracelsus* examining the temptations of the aspiring intellect (Paracelsus) and the yearning heart (Aprile), both seeking to overcome all limitations and live in the infinite, only in the end recognizing that knowledge (power) and love must join forces for effective realization of either.\(^{31}\) Now in *Sordello*, after his visit to Venice, he investigates the will that would manifest its infinite energy in the deployment of all its resources and how this involves both a concept of power and a concept of love. To do this, he decided to make Palma more nearly representative of love while characterizing Salinguerra as the figure of power, each having a claim on the hero who would not only manifest his energy but would also compel men to recognize him as their superior and master.

It is a mistake to view Salinguerra as the representative of crude, brutal power. If he were only that, he would not be the attractive character that he so obviously is to the narrator.\(^{32}\) Salinguerra is one of those people who can both speak and act with confidence not because they are witlessly single-minded but because they are so firmly rooted in the world: “why, men must twine / Somehow with something,” he says (4. 778–79). It is perhaps no small indication of the narrator’s liking for Salinguerra that he is permitted to speak at much greater length and to be far more fully characterized than Palma. Like the Wife of Bath, Salinguerra has had the world in his time and enjoyed it all, and at age sixty looks younger than Sordello at thirty.

In the first half of the poem, Salinguerra hardly appears. Called “easy-natured soldier” (2. 1014) and speaking in “noble accents” (3. 548), he is but a presence in the background. Though there is occasional use of the words “strength” and “power,” they are nearly always associated with grace and beauty, Sordello believing that song will be the means by which he will exert his power. When Sordello decides to make society the instrument for manifesting his will, the words are used in a political or military sense and come to be closely connected with Salinguerra.
Sordello’s difficulties in being a man of action are roughly the same as those he had in being a poet: where he tried to manifest himself fully in words, he now wishes to do the same with deeds: “to display completely here / The mastery another life should learn, / Thrusting in time eternity’s concern” (1.564–66). Sordello wishes to ally himself with the good and serve mankind. But what is the good and what service should he undertake? The Guelfs and the Ghibellins, the chief political parties, are no guide. “If a Cause remained / Intact, distinct from these, and fate ordained, / that Cause for me?” (4.950–52). Where he could imagine verbalization of a whole perception only to discover his medium of language incapable of rendering it, he now finds that he can imagine a perfect society—a new Rome—only to discover that he has no means for realizing his vision: there is no more possibility of building it “all at once” than of saying it “all at once.” Rome was not built in a day.

Given the power to take on Salinguerra’s strength, Sordello is left in a quandary as to what to do. Making the decision becomes an impossible burden for him. Others who made pretense to strength not half his own had succeeded in various pursuits, while he had not, because they had some inner “core” or submitted to “some moon” drawing them on. In short, they had a “function” (5.57–60) because they had a purpose. Neither Palma nor Salinguerra would prove equal to swaying all Sordello, but the strength and love they offered would have provided at least a partial sense of purpose. But no, he could embrace neither because neither was sufficient “moon” to “match his sea” (6.89–93):

Since
One object viewed diversely may evince
Beauty and ugliness—this way attract,
That way repel, why gloze upon the fact?
Why must a single of the sides be right?
Who bids choose this and leave its opposite?

Where is the “abstract Right” (6.441–47)? Where are the power and love that will sanction life in the finite world?
Retiring to an upper room, Sordello ponders what he should do—and being Sordello he can do nothing. Taking one course of action is the denial of the validity of all others: "The real way seemed made up of all the ways"; thus "why must a single be right?" (6. 36, 445). Sordello's fault in this as in other possible endeavors is that he is unwilling to adopt a limited course of action. For to be valid it must yield immediate satisfaction and perfect results. Why sully truth by working with only a flint of truth? Why "brutalize" soul by enclosing it within a restraining body? Why yield eternity for the "single sphere—Time" (6. 575, 555).

Finding no answer to the questions, Sordello has it supplied by the narrator. "Ah my Sordello," he says

I this once befriend
And speak for you: A Power above him still
Which, utterly incomprehensible,
Is out of rivalry, which thus he can
Love, tho' unloving all conceived by Man—
What need! And of—none the minutest duct
To that out-Nature, nought that would instruct
And so let rivalry begin to live—
But of a Power its representative
Who, being for authority the same,
Communication different, should claim
A course the first chose and this last revealed—
This Human clear, as that Divine concealed—
The utter need!

(6. 590–603)

It is the Incarnation of Christ that serves as the pattern for him who seeks to understand how energy and power find satisfactory manifestation in the phenomenal world, or, to use Sordello's terms, how soul is embodied with meaning and purpose. What the narrator means, among other things, is that any effort to achieve a perfectly incarnate soul is nothing more or less than "an insane impulse" (3. 27), this being a power reserved to God alone. Yet the Incarnation can serve as a pattern for self-realization, as Sordello apparently discovers in his
dying moment, his eyes being like a “spent swimmer’s if he spies / Help from above in his extreme despair” (6. 616–17).

With his power God created the world, and with his love he embodied himself in human form, not abhoring the Virgin’s womb, so as to reveal a divine plan for creation. If God can condescend to time and matter, find the joy that comes “when so much Soul is wreaked in Time on Matter,” surely it is hubris for anyone, artist or politician, to “let the Soul attempt sublime / Matter beyond its scheme.” No, let the artist or politician take God’s act as a model for his own and so “fit to the finite his infinity” (6. 493–99). The soul must supplement the body’s fragility with its power of infinitely adapting itself to temporary conditions. True adaptation is not utter embodiment; but “true works” will, like the Incarnation, reflect the passion and the power and the knowledge “far / Transcending these, majestic as they are” (3. 622–28) and will, as Sordello desired, “oblige . . . recognise / The Hid by the Revealed” (3. 570–71).

It is to the Myth of the Incarnation that all elements in the poem have been leading. I am not prepared to argue that Browning accepted the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—in fact, the passage cited above makes no mention of Christ at all—but I do feel safe in saying that he, like Schlegel and other Romantic Ironists before him, embraced it as a mythic pattern, a model of organization for his life as artist. The obsessive subject matter of his first three published works—the sense of the infinite power of the imagination and the concern to channel it—is surely reflective of the poet’s own struggle to fit imagination, which he felt to be boundless, to the quotidian world, which he knew only too well to be limited. Power, knowledge, love he believed himself to possess in abundance, even in superfluity. What he needed was “some point / Whereto those wandering rays should all converge” (Paracelsus, 5. 690–91). Although Paracelsus is granted a vision of progress, he nevertheless dies before understanding how power and love—Paracelsus and Aprile—might effectively combine so that “dim fragments” can “be united in some wondrous whole” (5. 686–87). All he can hope for is that in the dim future men will “shape forth a third, / And better tem-
per’d spirit, warn’d by both” (5. 886–87). But this hope for an evolved humanity resulting in what Tennyson in *In Memoriam* called “the Christ that is to be” was like Sordello’s vision of a new Rome. What was lacking was some authority or sanction giving impulse and impetus to progress: a recognition of a Power beyond all human power that even the most imaginative of men with their extraordinary sense of power cannot hope to rival and that has created the world purposefully. Ah yes, “what need!” But how know this Power? Never except through revelation. And what form could revelation take so as to be made accessible to men? Only human form—human form “representative” of Power and having its “authority”: “This Human clear, as that Divine concealed.” Ah yes, “the utter need!”

When Browning arrived at this conclusion, we cannot know. Presumably it was after his return home from Venice that he induced the Incarnation from his own personal need. That it was not orthodoxly Christian, or even Christian at all, may be inferred from the metaphor that follows the passage devoted to it:

as says

Old fable, the two doves were sent two ways
About the world—where in the midst they met
Tho’ on a shifting waste of sand, men set
Jove’s temple.

(6. 605–9)

The Incarnation also provided for Browning the perfect paradigm for his conception of the poet. We have frequently noted his growing dissatisfaction with the Romantic concept of the poet as bard. The notion of the poet as prophet living on a mountaintop and singing, mostly to himself, under divine inspiration did not fit Browning’s idea of poetry as dialogue. But the poet as God living among the creatures he had created, giving and drawing sustenance from them—this was more nearly congruous with his own understanding of the poet’s role—at least better fitted his own experience of himself as poet. His almost expressed aim had been to be both “sub-
jective” and “objective,” not sequentially but simultaneously. The Incarnation offered the pattern by which the creator could be both in and out of his creation, immanent and transcendent. In addition, the Incarnation was the perfect expression (and explanation) of the irony Browning felt drawn by and had displayed, as we witnessed in Strafford. In the Mystery of the Incarnation was the supreme irony: what appears as complete objectivity on God’s part is in fact a vehicle for something very personal and subjective—namely, the revelation of Personality behind creation. For one who wished to display the irony that occurs when the poem “oblige[s] . recognise / The Hid by the Revealed” (3. 570–71), the Incarnation was the perfect paradigm.

On the human level this irony involves nothing less than an attitude of the self before the problem of existence; it is the taking of a philosophical position on the fundamental question of the relationship of the self and the world. It presents itself as the negation of the “serious” or “objective” character of the external world and, correlatively, as an affirmation of the creative omnipotence of the thinking subject. But this affirmation is only provisional; for Romantic Irony, which is always dynamic, does not allow the self to come to a stop at a single point but causes it to travel incessantly between the infinite and the finite, the determined and the undetermined. Irony is not, as Thomas Mann observed in Doctor Faustus, a matter of either/or but of both/and; or as V. Jankélévitch says, it is not “neutrum, mais utrumque.”37 It is a balance of dialectical movement. If the movement stops, then irony disappears and with it the possibility of a comprehension of external and internal reality. If the world is denied, then madness reigns and one is plunged into an imagined universe; if, in turn, the soul or spirit is denied, then one is left with a mechanistic world from which values, especially artistic ones, are forever banished. Irony is therefore what Jankélévitch calls “the drunkenness of transcendental subjectivity,” although it must be added that the liberty of irony is exercised by leaving phenomenal reality with the view of a return to it.38

It was this dialectic movement between the infinite and the finite, this hovering between the real and the ideal that the
Incarnation symbolized. And it was Browning’s acceptance of the Myth that allowed him to become the radically ironic poet who, as noted in the beginning of this chapter, could bring together in one poem the disparate elements that make up Sordello. Browning had found the “moon” for his “sea” apparently in the process of writing the poem, and “this once” he could speak for Sordello because he at last knew what to say on his protagonist’s behalf.

Earlier I mentioned how the dialogic mode of procedure in Sordello becomes a structural principle and how this gives rise to theme and how theme in turn plays back into structure. We have already noticed the dialogic mode and theme in reference to the poet, the narrator, and the protagonist. As we saw, the irony that Browning adopted does not allow the signified to be the end of discourse; on the contrary, it is the return of the sense of the signified—first understood directly and then ironically and indirectly—to the signifier that provides the value of the discourse, that of an aesthetic act. Romantic Irony, in other words, does not permit conclusion: it forms a cycle of contradictory senses perpetually defying the principle of non-contradiction. Where Romantic Irony is concerned, a thing is simultaneously that which it is and that which it is not; it affirms simultaneously the nullity of the work that it supports and inspires and the transcendent value of that work.

Let us see how these observations may be applied to the structure of Sordello. Upon first acquaintance the poem seems to lack unity: there appear to be two main parts separated by the personal digression. The first part is circular. It begins with the present, soon retreats to the past, finally returns to the present. The time span is thirty years; the locations are Goito, Mantua, Verona; the emphasis is on narrative and concrete detail even though the subject matter is largely focused on the protagonist’s inner life. The narrator refers to this first half as the first “round” of Sordello’s life (3. 563). The introduction to the chronological narrative in the first part, which deals with the suffering caryatides bearing the burden of the font at Goito (1. 389–427), is paralleled by an introduction to part two, which is again concerned with caryatides, but these “up
and doing" (4. 138–69). The second part is horizontally linear. The time span is three days; the focus is on abstract discussion and psychological exploration of motive. The narrator brings the tale to an end with Sordello’s death and the events ensuing from Sordello’s inability to act.

This is the apparent structure of the poem. Upon closer inspection we find that the division into two parts may be more apparent than real. If we look upon Sordello as a poem cast in the epic mold, as the narrator almost says it is (1. 360–73), then we see that it opens in medias res with present action and then switches to a long flashback to explain how the present moment of crisis is reached. The present is condensed in time and concentrated in locality—the short stay in Verona being transitional—in contrast to the retrospective part, which is diffused in time and setting. Regarded in this way, the poem may be represented by a straight line interrupted only by the personal digression in book three, which we might call a variation on the traditional epic invocation to the muse.

Or if we view the poem in terms of growth of the protagonist’s moral consciousness, we can represent it by a rising diagonal. In Goito the self is idealized and aggrandized; in Mantua it is alternately arrogant and despairing; in Verona the self enters into a state of relationship, although this is limited to one person; in Ferrara the self is transcended through moral sympathy and ends in “triumph” over “extreme despair” (6. 615, 617). This, then, is a comedy in the Dantean sense—a progress from despair to bliss.

If we look at the poem in terms of Sordello’s actual accomplishments, we must figure it as a circle. The narrator will allow no prize to Sordello at all; on the contrary, he castigates Sordello vigorously for all the things he did not do both as a poet and as a political leader (6. 756–69, 829–51). Sordello’s body is returned to Goito and buried “within that cold font-tomb” (6. 632) wherein his mother is buried and by which the boy had sat many an evening. In effect, Sordello is returned to the womb: there has been no birth at all. That is why after Sordello’s death the figure of the circle and the idea of return frequently occur in the last 260 lines of book six and why the last line (“Who would has heard Sordello’s story told”)
repeats, except for the tense of the verb, the opening line of the poem.

Sordello does, then, possess a unified structure, to be figured as either linear or circular, according to how we view Sordello’s life. The story of Sordello is not, however, the final subject of the poem; rather, it is the poet and his efforts to write a poem. The narrator suggests this when he relates how, a week earlier, an old priest had told him that Alberic’s skeleton had been recently brought to light after six centuries and also, apparently quite superfluously, that June is the month for carding off the first cocoons that the silkworms make. This is, says the narrator, “a double news, / Nor he nor I could tell the worthier. Choose!” (6. 795–96). Which is the more important—the present or the past, an unearthed piece of history or the act of fabrication, the seer or the fashioner? We must choose. If we let ourselves, with our “co-operating fancy,” be guided by the ending of the poem, we must choose both.

For the ending returns us to the playful irony that almost seems to vanish in books five and six and in effect cancels what had appeared likely to become the center of the poem, a philosophical-moral center. Sordello’s apparent “triumph” in discovering the power and love of which the narrator spoke as needful promised victory of meaning over irony. But this is true only if we read the narrator’s befriending speech (6. 590–603) as the last word, as so many commentators do. “Is there no more to say?” the narrator asks (6. 819). Of course there is, as there always is in Browning. Here as in Paracelsus the poet makes an appeal to history for an additional perspective, a final word, on his subject. But in this poem history, when divorced from legend, is unyielding: its word is at best equivocal and paradoxical. Sordello was a failure but also a small success. He did not achieve what he should have achieved, but nevertheless lives on, through a small snatch of his verse, among the glorious company of poets. But the last word does not belong to history. The last word belongs to the poet, who, turning to his audience, insists in effect that the imaginative donnée of his poem is Romantic Irony, which ends in a spiraling self-consciousness and forgoes meaning for metaphysical and aesthetic play.
We may perhaps best see how Romantic Irony is informative of the structure and also the style of *Sordello* if we note how the poem reflects Browning's attempt to destroy the conventional responses to, and prefabricated interpretations of, language that use of an inherited poetical vehicle entails: "my art intends / New structure from the ancient" (5. 642-43). The Romantic Age took form at a time when printing had become almost the sole means for the storing and dissemination of knowledge. Print had reduced sound to surface and hearing to vision, knowledge being tied not to spoken words but to texts. This new economy inevitably affected ideas about poetry, and during the late eighteenth century, it was clearly understood that a poem was a text, something separated from the lived world. As we have already seen, Browning wanted poetry to be something more than a text having a peculiar life of its own, separate and distinct from the poet. He wanted to move closer to the reader (or auditor). And to do this he had to transcend the limitations of print, which means that he had to circumvent the contrivances of print to enclose everything within its bounds. In short, Browning, though using print, attempted to achieve immediacy by dialogue. This is why *Sordello* is addressed to an audience to whom the poet responds during the course of the poem.

To subvert the linear and sequential nature of a text, Browning organized *Sordello* to give it the effect of being spatially nonsequential. He sought to concentrate its entire length, almost 6,000 lines, into a single moment of simultaneous perception filtered through the eye of the narrator. The style of the verse itself he also contrived to yield this effect. The systematic derangement of tense, the shifting point of view, the absence (in 1840) of quotation marks, the frequent ambiguity of referent, the elliptical and involuted syntax—all contribute to the effect of simultaneity. The diction is highly colored, ranging from the grotesque to the delicately beautiful, and the rhythm varies from lyric mellifluency to halting, stammering speech—these too giving the impression of everything going on at the same time. Browning aimed to hold "the imaged thing" (2. 571) in abeyance until all elements were brought before the reader and the entire style-meaning could be perceived as a
whole, simultaneously. Like his Sordello, he would say it “all at once” (2. 626).

But while simultaneity is pursued, linearity is emphasized by other means: book-by-book progression of the story, realistic and historically accurate details, explained motives, symmetrical division into two parts, rhymed couplets. Thus the ambition to say it “all at once” receives its check—and this not unconsciously or unwillingly on the poet’s part. For Browning was highly skeptical about both the ability of his audience to interpret correctly and his own ability, given the resources of language, to express himself rightly. But to ensure at least a certain availability of meaning, he has to yield to some of the demands of a printed text. In brief, the poem is carefully structured, the basic organization being logically sequential. Yet it seems disorganized and formless, the effect of the whole being one of unreality, of fantasy rather than history.

This arabesque—Schlegel’s “artistically arranged confusion” with its “charming symmetry of contradictions”—is, then, Browning’s attempt at a poem that is both text and speech, embodied in print and constrained by linearity but defying the rules of grammar and the expectations of logic. Sordello exemplifies how Romantic Irony cannot accommodate itself to anything that seeks to limit it, how it wishes to be everywhere, to be all or not to be, and how the ironist must be a comedian or buffoon who makes sport of himself, his reader, and his work. As Friedrich Schlegel observed, in truly ironic works “there lives a real transcendental buffoonery. Their interior is permeated by the mood which surveys everything and rises above everything limited, even above the poet’s own art, virtue, and genius; and their exterior form by the histrionic style of an ordinary good Italian buffo” (Lyceum Fragment No. 42). In such works everything is jest and yet seriousness, artless openness and yet deep dissimulation. The kind of irony informing Sordello is that which “contains and incites a feeling of the insoluble conflict of the absolute and the relative, of the impossibility and necessity of total communication” (Lyceum Fragment No. 108). Hence in Sordello, Browning tries to say it “all at once” with the ironist’s full recognition of the impossi-
bility of such utterance. It is Sordello’s tragedy that he never learned to be an ironist.

If, as Aprile discovered, only God is the perfect poet, then no mortal, even though he imitates God’s creative act and God’s ability to be both immanent and transcendent, can be "a whole and perfect Poet" (5. 116, in the revised Sordello). As the ghostly voice of his fellow poets tells Sordello, the collective poet surpasses what the individual poet can do. The song started by a predecessor is carried on by a present singer, whose works in turn will be furthered (and modified) by a future poet till “time’s mid-night / Concluding” (5. 103–18). It is the irony of incomplete completion—the work that is offered as a finished product yet that is but a stage in an ongoing process—that ultimately dictated Browning’s decision to cast Sordello as an offering to, and a dialogue with, his poetic predecessors.

Speaking of his disappointment concerning the reception of his poetry, the poet tells his audience, mainly of the dead summoned from both heaven and hell, that he regards them as his “lovers” who have been tempted to return “to see how their successors fare.” They are a brotherhood, sitting each by each and “striving to look as living as he can.” During this performance the poet will occasionally peep forth to see whether they are asleep or approve of what he is doing. But he dismisses one spirit, who in the 1863 headnotes is identified as Shelley, because the consciousness of his presence would make the other poets seem nearer and more formidable and the narrator’s task therefore more presumptuous. The narrator feels, in other words, that he must define his own difference as a poet and not be overly encumbered by the burden of the past.

As we have seen, something of this same situation occurs in Pauline, where the speaker invokes Shelley—Sun-treader, and in Paracelsus, where Aprile hears a voice of poetic attainment and where Paracelsus encounters Galen in hallucination. In each case a present figure comes to terms with a past one. As Herbert Tucker points out, “in his forerunner the secondary figure meets a double to whom he must defer, and emerges from the meeting with a distinguishing, sometimes chastening difference which strengthens his individuality.”

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This is more or less what happens in Sordello's encounter with Eglamor, although Sordello tends to regard the older poet at first as "imbecile" and his "opposite" (2. 135–95). Eglamor is, as noted earlier, a formalist poet, one of fixity and enclosure (2. 204–06; 3. 619–20), who completely identifies himself—his whole meaning and purpose—with his art and who when shown the inadequacy of his formally faultless art, unenvously passes his crown on to Sordello, kisses his hand, and dies. Sordello then is chastened: hearing Eglamor's ode once more, he learned from it "how to live in weakness as in strength" and recognized Eglamor's just claim to fame (2. 280–90): Eglamor is simply a different kind of poet from Sordello, although it was Eglamor who, in book one, was the younger poet's inspiration. Just as Sordello begins to define his difference from Eglamor, so does Browning continue in book three to examine his own relationship with his poetic predecessors under the guise of talking about Sordello and Eglamor (615–75).

The poet-narrator turns to his audience of poets again in book three in a discussion of bards, who are said to offer more than they can deliver and who finally are less valuable to mankind than the present poet-narrator. "Presumptuous!" cries out one of his audience. But the poet-narrator replies that it is some of his brother poets who magnify the office of the poet. For the poet aims not only at wide vision, as bards insist, but also at effecting right action, the full realization of which can never be attained on earth. It is true that the poet-narrator does not do what he would like to do. But has his audience done any better? Poetry is, as we have seen, like a complex engine constantly set up and dismantled when its function is completed, each individual poet but adding his part to the making of the machine. It is, in short, a corporate enterprise carried on by a company of poets. After addressing two of them directly, he then turns to his larger audience to ask that they not misconceive his "portraiture" or "undervalue its adornments quaint," because what may seem merely devilish may prove a transcendent vision (986–88). In fact, like Saint John, they may find it a portrait of themselves.

The idea of tradition among the fraternity of poets is devel-
oped in book five where Sordello addresses Salinguerra on the progress of poetry. Tracing the advance from the epoist to the dramatist-analyst to the synthetist, he speaks in greater detail about the "complex gin" that poets as a brotherhood are always engaged in making and dismantling. Browning seems to have gained from Friedrich Schlegel many of his notions about synthetist art. Schlegel says:

The analytical writer observes the reader as he is; accordingly, he makes his calculation, sets his machine to make the appropriate effect on him. The synthetic writer constructs and creates his own reader; he does not imagine him as resting and dead, but lively and advancing toward him. He makes that which he had invented gradually take shape before the reader's eyes, or he tempts him to do the inventing for himself. He does not want to make a particular effect on him, but rather enters into a solemn relationship of innermost symphilosophy or sympoetry. (Lyceum Fragment No. 112)

Perhaps a completely new epoch of sciences and arts would arise, if symphilosophy and sympoetry became so universal and intimate that it would no longer be unusual if several characters who complement each other would produce common works. Sometimes one can scarcely resist the idea that two minds might actually belong together like separate halves, and that only in union could they be what they might be. (Athenaeum Fragment No. 125)

In the past the poet and his audience or the poet and his predecessors were hardly "brothers" because of a lack of full appreciation of the past or of a poetic tradition. But now with awareness of a rich and copious past, the poet does not elaborate on those forms of previous ages but instead reduces and so transforms them:

a single touch more may enhance,
A touch less turn to insignificance
Those structure's symmetry the Past has strewed
Your world with, once so bare:
need was then expand,
Expatiate.

Hence the present poet joins the brotherhood of poets, not shoving them aside or ignoring them or being immobilized by
the necessity to compete with them but making use of them, building on them:

my art intends
New structure from the ancient: as they changed
The spoils of every clime at Venice,
till their Dome
From earth's reputed consummations razed
A seal the all-transmuting Triad blazed
Above.

(5.627–51)

Having, under the mask of Sordello, worked out to his satisfaction his own differences as a poet from Shelley and other poetic predecessors and thus liberated himself from the burden of the past, the poet-narrator can now proceed to a better appreciation of his inheritance. That is why he changes his mind about Eglamor, who in books two and three stands as a rival to be bested. Eglamor at the end of book six becomes "the face I waited for" in "the golden courts": "despite ill-reports, / Disuse, some wear of years, that face retained / Its joyous look of love." And as the poet-narrator spirals upward in his art, there is "ever that face there," the last admitted to the golden realms of poetry, who, concerned that those ascending will not find "perfect triumph," nevertheless "wish thee well, impend / Thy frank delight at their exclusive track, / That upturned fervid face and hair put back!" (6.798–818). The passage is difficult to interpret because of the syntax and ambiguity of pronominal reference, but the narrator and Eglamor seem to blend to the point where Eglamor is not only an inspiration but a brother in the spiraling flight of "gyres of life and light / More and more gorgeous."

Turning to his audience, the poet-narrator says, "friends, / Wake up; the ghost's gone." Ghosts—not only Sordello's but also the "sad disheveled ghost" (3.696) that is his muse—are said to be either fair or foul according to the odor they leave behind. Is it Satan's brimstone or the perfume of Saint John's Patmos that they smell? The rose may be sweet but it has no lingering smell. The musk-pod on the other hand has an
enduring pungnecy and strength—just like the poem they have heard. It has not been easy and the burden has been put on them, but “who would has heard Sordello’s story told.” *Fratres, avete atque valete.* Tomorrow, on to engines new.

It is said of *Sordello* as of *Pauline* that, stung by criticism of it, Browning abandoned this particular style of writing and moved on to another more accessible to his readers. One wonders, however, how he could have continued in the *Sordello* vein. For it is the perfect vehicle for what he wanted to do. And Browning being Browning, he had no intention, especially during these early years, of remaining at work on the same cog of the engine that is poetry. As Ezra Pound observed, “Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello!*”

The poem is remarkable for its amazing architecture, only some aspects of which I have been able to mention. Though appearing to most readers as chaotic, it is one of the most carefully constructed poems in the English language. Almost no event and almost no utterance is without parallel elsewhere in the poem. Structure and theme are perfectly fused, one giving rise to the other that in turn informs the first so that this one may illuminate the other and so on *ad infinitum*. *Sordello* is a beautiful, endless mirroring of itself, like that box of Quaker Oats which Aldous Huxley has Philip Quarles allude to in chapter 22 of *Point Counter Point*.

In verse style as in theme and structure, there is also the constant process of reflection. This running-together is perhaps most evident in the passages in which the narrator speaks for Sordello in indirect discourse, but it exists in many other passages as well. For example, this passage following Palma’s kissing the dead (or dying) Sordello:

*By this the hermit-bee has stopped  
His day’s toil at Goito—the new cropped  
Dead vine-leaf answers, now ’tis eve, he bit,  
Twirled so, and filed all day—the mansion’s fit  
God counseled for; as easy guess the word  
That passed betwixt them and become the third  
To the soft small unfrighted bee, as tax*
Him with one fault—so no remembrance racks
Of the stone maidens and the font of stone
He, creeping thro' the crevice, leaves alone.

(6. 621–30)

The bee and Sordello and Palma are all fused, not only in ambiguous pronouns but also in suggestive actions. In addition, the rhyme—and thus the pause at the end of the line—causes a line to be read first one way and then, when the reader goes on to the next line, in another. This is what we may call the ironic style.

Subsumed under it is the "Metaphysical," "witty" style:

Deeds let escape are never to be done:
Leaf-fall and grass-spring for the year, but us—
Oh forfeit I unalterably thus
My chance? nor two lives wait me, this to spend
Learning save that?

(3. 94–98)

and the ur-Hopkins style:

Down the field-path, Sordello, by thorn-rows
Alive with lamp-flies, swimming spots of fire
And dew, outlining the black cypress' spire
She waits you at, Elys, who heard you first
Woo her the snow-month—ah, but ere she durst
Answer 'twas April! Linden-flower-time-long
Her eyes were on the ground.

(3. 104–10)

To the verse style of Sordello may be applied the epithet impressionist, a term that I use in preference to Browning's own word synthetist as being more generally understandable. The purpose of impressionism in language as in visual art is to sketch in the intuitive moment and nature intermediate between the reality and its apprehension as an idea; impressionism attempts, in a word, to render perception. As Browning noted in book two, the self does not apprehend experience
as a series of discrete entities like the words of a sentence but in an immediate and comprehensive way. Perception reaches us whole, before the analytic machinery of language resolves it into a series. Impressionism aims to make us as viewers or hearers aware of the experience at the moment of its generation, before the artificial control of percept and concept has set in. It is this impressionistic style that gives much of the effect of simultaneity and wholeness in *Sordello*.

Whatever we call it, it is a highly personal style. The style of his first two published works is generally a Romantic style and not very distinctive. The style of *Strafford* is more experimental but still not characteristically Browningesque. With *Sordello*, however, we know we are reading Browning. He has found his proper voice at last, for though later poems modify to some degree the style of *Sordello*, they are still recognizably kin to it. No one can say that it is easy, but it is far more penetrable than it is generally made out to be. Indeed, *Sordello* deserves a fate far better than that which it has suffered even until this day.