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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HEROIC FIGURE

IN THE EARLY POETRY OF

ROBERT BROWNING

BY

LINDA E. REICHE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
at University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario

1975

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ABSTRACT

When Robert Browning published Men and Women in 1855, most of his aesthetic, moral, and philosophic ideas had already been firmly established, although they were embedded in the confusing, and often obscure, dark passages of his earlier works. In an attempt to understand the growth of this poet's mind, we must then turn to these earlier works. Since the purpose of this paper is to study the development of Robert Browning's heroic figure, it is essential to begin by defining early-nineteenth-century concepts of the hero and his relationship to society.

Nineteenth-century thinkers were fascinated with the heroic figure, and several of the factors which contributed to the Victorian interest in the hero will be examined briefly in Chapter One. Browning, like many of his contemporaries, fully acknowledged the essential role of the hero and was particularly interested in the poet as transcendental hero. Unlike his Romantic predecessors, however, Browning was concerned with the artist's dilemma of the isolation of the self, a problem he began to solve by focusing on the role of the transcendental hero as "Maker-See". That is, the poet must first transcend his culture to save or define the 'self', but then he must re-enter his society to teach others, so that all men may be guided to a higher level of moral action. As Browning points out in his Essay on Shelley, the poet must always be concerned with the realities of this world:

For it is with this world as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilized,¹ but the raw material it operates upon must remain.

This concept of a dual perspective is summed up in Browning's own phrase of "putting the infinite within the finite",² and will be examined in detail.

The problems of moving out from the self and of the means by which the infinite could be communicated in finite terms were of particular interest to Browning, and we see him focusing on these areas in his earliest works, Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello, recognizing but not satisfactorily solving the problems of the transcendental hero. Finally, in Sordello, Browning concludes that the hero must be an artist, as it is through the medium of art that the hero can make vital contact with humanity. In the Bells and Pomegranates series, published between 1841 and 1846, Browning, through his experiments in technique and style, arrives at two conclusions: first, that the poet, though he must constantly aspire to the infinite and unattainable, must work through finite and fragmentary means--hence the beginning of the dramatic monologue form which culminated in the fusion of ob-

¹R. Browning, "On the Poet Objective and Subjective; On Shelley as Man and Poet," Papers of the Browning Society, I (1881-1884), 8.

²Browning's letter to John Ruskin, Dec. 10, 1855, recorded in The Works of John Ruskin, ed. by E.T. Cooke and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1909) Vol. 36, xxxiv.

jective and subjective poet in The Ring and The Book. Second, Browning adopts the image of the Incarnation as the symbol and means by which the infinite is made finite. This concept is best exemplified in Saul because here the poet affirms, through the symbol of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, by which the Spirit is made Flesh, that the poet too can humbly embrace all aspects of humanity while affirming and aspiring toward an infinite and transcendental vision.

The first chapter will provide an introduction to the attraction of nineteenth-century thinkers to the transcendental hero and will examine the background of Browning's interest in the area. In the ensuing chapters we will trace the development of Browning's concept of the hero in Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, and conclude with a brief analysis of Pippa Passes and Saul. The study covers most of Browning's major poems from 1833 (the publication date of Pauline) up until 1845 when Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, the seventh number of the Bells and Pomegranates series, was published. Saul is an exception, because, although the first nine lyrics were published in 1845, it was not completed and republished until 1855 in Men and Women. However, because this poem so completely illustrates the development of the transcendental hero, and because the break after lyric ix and the subsequent conclusion of the poem are in themselves significant, this poem has been included in the study. Although passing references may be made to Browning's dramas, which were also written during this period, an examination of them

has not been included in this paper as they require a complete study by themselves.³ The central focus of this examination is on Browning's concern with the isolation of the self--the dilemma of his transcendental hero--and how he eventually solved this conflict by establishing the role of the hero as "Maker-See".

³Such a study has been conducted by Howard Barnett, "Robert Browning and the Drama" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1959).

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I would sincerely like to thank my advisor, Dr. Colin Atkinson, for his patience and assistance in the supervision of this thesis. His suggestions and encouragement have been most appreciated.

TEXTUAL NOTE

The Ohio University Press, under the general supervision of Roma King Jr., is currently editing The Complete Works of Robert Browning and this edition will be the new authoritative text. All excerpts in this thesis from Pauline, Paracelsus, Sordello, Pippa Passes and Saul have been taken from this edition.

Because the Ohio University Press edition is incomplete, all other textual references, with the exception of the Essay on Shelley, are from F. G. Kenyon's The Works of Robert Browning, 10 Volumes (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1912). Excerpts from the Essay on Shelley have been taken from Papers of the Browning Society, Number I (1881-1884), 3-19.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Before delving into Browning's poetry to trace the development of the heroic figure, it is essential to examine some of the shaping influences on the young poet. Born in 1812, Browning was a precocious and avid scholar, and, as a youth, nourished his mind and soul upon the essence of Romanticism. While it is not the aim of this study to delve into and define the murky depths of Romanticism (such a task would be formidable if not impossible), it is important, however, to acknowledge the tremendous influence of early-nineteenth-century thinking upon the shaping of the young Browning's mind. In order to examine the development in his early poetry, the reader must have some awareness of the atmosphere in which Browning developed, and it is mainly for this reason that we must establish a brief summary of Romantic thought, although admitting at the same time that any single statement of the main currents of Romanticism can be neither totally satisfying nor completely comprehensive.

While there is much contention among scholars concerning the basis of Romanticism, certain aspects have been agreed upon by all, and these aspects will provide the intellectual setting into which we can place the young Browning. In his essay "Towards a Theory of Romanticism" Morse Peckham attempts to analyze some of the fundamental aspects of Romanticism, and, for the purpose of this study, his very broad definition will suffice:

What then is Romanticism? Whether philosophic, theologic, or aesthetic, it is the revolution in the European mind against thinking in terms of static mechanism and the redirection of the mind to thinking in terms of dynamic organicism. Its values are change, imperfection, growth, diversity,¹ the creative imagination, the collective unconscious.

In his essay, Peckham focuses on the shift in thought which occurred in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Neoclassic values of perfection, changelessness, uniformity and rationalism were replaced by values which emphasized "dynamic organicism". This aspect of Romanticism is fundamental, for out of this shift in thought evolved many of the traditional characteristics of the concept: individualism, mysticism, a revived interest in the past, primitivism, a love of nature, liberalism, predominance of the imagination, etc.

All of these characteristics were prevalent aspects of Romanticism which crowded the atmosphere in which Robert Browning grew up. As William Irvine and Park Honan point out in their biography of the poet, even though Wordsworth and Coleridge, the early revolutionary Romantics, were subsiding into conservatism by the time Browning had "arrived at the age of intellectual curiosity", the new generation of Romantics were stirring the hearts of all passionate young idealists:

Keats was then a recent literary scandal, and Shelley a recent moral one. ... Byron terminated his wicked, idealistic, sumptuously poetic career at the outset of his Greek adventure--producing showers of horror

¹Morse Peckham, "Towards a Theory of Romanticism," PMLA, LXVI (March 1951), 14.

and admiration in virtuous adults and epidemics of Byronism in literary adolescents.²

Browning, caught in this epidemic, wrote a whole volume of Byronic verse at the age of twelve, although Incondita, as he titled the volume, was never published.

One of the concepts of Romanticism which was of particular interest to Browning was the shift in goal from attainment to aspiration. Because neoclassic thinkers viewed the world as a perfect mechanism, the goals of the neoclassic artist were directed towards the attainment of that perfection. Romantic thinkers, however, as their goal shifted from 'being' to 'becoming', began to place new emphasis on the process or the aspiring towards the goal. The importance of aspiration culminated in early Victorian thought, and Robert Browning was especially fascinated with this concept. In his dissertation "Aspiration in Early and Mid-Victorian Literature", Henry Klomp makes a careful study of this subject, and defines aspiration as "man's desire for ultimate spiritual values and his efforts directed towards their achievement."³ He emphasizes the importance of aspiration to the Victorians, as a valuable experience quite apart from the goal achieved. Aspiration as an end in itself was, of course, fundamental in Browning's thinking, and this theme reoccurs in all of his poetry. Because

²W. Irvine and P. Honan, The Book The Ring and The Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974), 13.

³H. Klomp, "The Idea of Aspiration in Early and Mid-Victorian Literature," (diss., University of Michigan, 1952), 2.

of this emphasis placed on aspiration, Browning was concerned that man never set his goals too low but that he constantly aspire to something higher. The most famous expression of this idea is in Andrea del Sarto:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for.

(97-98.)

Klomp attributes the importance of aspiration in Victorian thinking to two main sources: the flourishing idea of developmental progress and the transcendental reaction against materialism and utilitarianism. Walter Houghton also stresses the importance of aspiration to the early Victorians, but he attributes its importance to yet another source, the uncertainty of the goals to be attained:

The fact is that an age which knew the Romantic taste, and the Victorian desire, for ideal aspirations, was also an age of transition in which the old ideals were vanishing and new ones were many and half-formed. Aspiration could not easily find its objective correlative, whether a great cause to serve or a high character to strive for. It tended to jump from one aim to another or to look for a vague humanitarianism, and therefore it became, when the end proved elusive, an end in itself.

The idea of aspiration as an end in itself evolved as a major concept for the early and mid-Victorians, and in Browning's development of the heroic character, it plays an important part.

Another direct result of Romanticism, related to this emphasis on aspiration, was the growth of the transcendental

⁴W. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 293.

movement. The Romantic poet aspires to the Absolute or Ideal by transcending the actual, and transcendentalism, a form of epistemology, grew as a reaction against an empirical way of thinking. Intuitive or spiritual means of arriving at Truth predominated over sense experience. Hoxie Fairchild, in an examination of this movement, assigns these values to the transcendental thinker:

... the transcendentalist values the world which is created by his imaginative will more highly than the world of which his senses bring him their crudely literal reports.

Man could arrive at the Absolute by transcending his own immediate culture. In the early nineteenth century, man's spirit longed for the Infinite, and because the Divine or Supernatural was felt to be Immanent, or to touch the Real or Natural, the transcendentalist aspired to the Infinite through the Natural to satisfy the soul and elevate the self. What was of primary concern to Browning was the egotistical aspect of the Romantic transcendentalist and the despair with which he viewed the finite and earthly. Both Browning and Thomas Carlyle were concerned with the isolation of the self, which was, more often than not, the final achievement of the transcendental hero, and were searching for solutions to this problem. As Dowden writes of this period:

The wail of egoism, proclaiming its own misery and incapable of announcing any way of deliverance from

⁵H. Fairchild, The Romantic Quest (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1965), 325.

such unprofitable despair, had been heard sufficiently often.

Carlyle and Browning did not reject transcendentalism, for both saw this process as the way of aspiring towards the Absolute and Divine, but they turned their attention to the course of action which the transcendental thinker could take in order to eliminate both despair with the earthly and a wallowing in the ego. Carlyle emphasized the Immanent, but felt that God's presence within the soul found its expression in active duty. Thus in Sartor Resartus he urges man to act: "Know what thou canst work at."⁷ Browning saw the importance of the transcendentalist's ability to bridge the gap between the Ideal and the Real, and he focuses on this process by attempting to establish a harmony between the Infinite to which man aspires and the Finite with which he has to be content. In his early poems Browning explores his quarrel with the traditional transcendentalist who cannot escape isolation of the self and who severs his contact with Humanity.

Transcendentalism is a process involving the individual. It emphasizes the individual, or hero, who can successfully save the self: the transcendental hero. Such an individual can, by the transcendental process, move away from materialistic finite goals to satiate the cravings of his soul with infinite ideals. The

⁶E. Dowden, Studies in Literature 1789-1872 (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench and Co., 1883), 74.

⁷T. Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, ed. by C.F. Harrold (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), 163.

transcendental hero came under close scrutiny in the nineteenth century, an age dominated by hero worship. For Browning the failure of the transcendentalist was his inability to avoid isolation of the self and to communicate his infinite vision to a finite reality. Thus the attributes of the heroic figure eventually developed by the poet must be carefully examined. Although his hero was a transcendentalist, Browning attempted to avoid the pitfalls of the earlier hero who had become ensnared within the ego, and had despaired at finite limitations.

Before analyzing the process through which Browning developed his hero, it is important to examine the significance of the heroic figure in the nineteenth century. Houghton has explored the fascination of nineteenth-century thinkers with the hero, and he suggests several reasons for this fascination:

When the Victorian period began, all the prerequisites for hero worship were present: the enthusiastic temper, the conception of the superior being, the revival of Homeric mythology and medieval ballad, the identification of great art with the grand style, the popularity of Scott and Byron, and the living presence of Napoleonic soldiers and sailors. ... In the fifty years after 1830 the worship of the hero was a major factor in English culture.

The importance of the heroic figure culminated in the works of perhaps the most influential thinker of the early Victorian period, Thomas Carlyle. In the uncertainty of the transition period of the mid-century, Carlyle's outspoken ideas offered security and conviction to a frightened and insecure populace--

⁸Houghton, 310.

find a hero and worship him. He saw the need for a Messianic figure to provide inspiration, ideals, and direction for his followers. Because of Carlyle's direction, to a society ripe for such noble aspirations, the atmosphere of mid-Victorian England was permeated with the essence of heroes and hero worship.

It was not until 1840 that Carlyle delivered his famous lecture series On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History, but in Sartor Resartus, first serialized in Fraser's Magazine in 1830-31, Carlyle had clarified many of his ideas regarding the heroic character. A hero was a man who not only had a concentration of divine force within him but who could act with this force. Carlyle's chief tenet was that great men should rule, and that others should worship them and be ruled. In his book A Century of Hero Worship, Eric Bentley summarizes Carlyle's concept of the role of the hero:

The hero is "sincere" and does his "duty", i.e. he acts intuitively, without the interference of mechanical philosophies or restrictive codes. ... The hero's function is dual. First he is a pattern for others to imitate, in himself a justification of life. Second he is creator, and through him history moves forward and not backwards: history is the biography of Great Men. ... the hero is life in all its potentialities: hence ... he is poet, prelate, king, or God, according to circumstances.

Before proceeding any further on this subject it is important to differentiate between Browning and Carlyle, even though the distinction is one of emphasis and focus rather than funda-

⁹E. Bentley, A Century of Hero Worship (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 35.

mental contradiction in belief. Whereas Carlyle is insistent on the ability of the hero to act and to achieve his aim, Browning emphasizes the importance of aspiration over achievement. Browning could not as easily jump from the individual transcendental vision to taking positive action in society as could Carlyle, and it is on this particular aspect of the hero that Browning focuses. How can a man who has glimpsed the infinite move back into a finite and limited society, and take his vision with him? The poet attempts to solve this question in the early stages of his poetic career. For Browning, the true hero is a man with a dual perspective who can put the infinite within the finite for the benefit of all humanity.

When Browning published Pauline anonymously in 1833, he was largely concerned with the problem of the self in isolation. Though the thought is often confused and the logic muddled in places, this poem has many fine qualities. A major concern of Browning in Pauline is to explore various ways of moving out from the self. The Pauline poet attempts to overcome his obsession with the self but fails because he cannot love, and because he cannot reconcile the infinite and the finite. The persona is selfish and proud. In this poem Browning does recognize the necessity of overcoming isolation of the self, and is groping for a means of conquering egomania. Both the fact that not a single copy of Pauline sold, and the stinging unpublished review that John Stuart Mill wrote of the poem, encouraged Browning

to tighten his control and to focus more sharply on his issues.¹⁰

Two years later he tried again. In Paracelsus, Browning further explores the problem of the hero to both aspire to the infinite and to retain his link with humanity. Through a semi-dramatic form the poet attempts to achieve more objectivity than in Pauline. Browning again examines the hero's attempt to move out from the self through various means, for Paracelsus, in his attempts to "know all", severs his link with humanity. The problem of both Paracelsus and Aprile is that they strive for the infinite without accepting the bounds and limitations of the finite. Because they scorn earthly fragmentary joys, they fail in their aspirations. In this poem, Browning recognizes the importance of fusing knowledge and love, although he is yet to evolve the means.

The publication of the infamous Sordello in 1840 is key in Browning's development, for here he establishes the importance of the transcendental hero as a poet or "Maker-See". Sordello is a study of the failed transcendental hero. In the poem, Browning examines the nature of the true poet, and explores the various facets of poetry through the stages of Sordello's development: the nature poet, the public poet, the political poet, the non-poet. By the end of the poem, Browning, although he has failed to make a positive affirmation of the exact poetic process, does establish art, or poetry, as the way of maintaining a dual perspective of

¹⁰W. C. DeVane has recorded and discussed Mill's criticism of Pauline in A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), 11, ff.

both the infinite and the finite.

In these first three poems, Browning reveals and fully explores his disillusion with the Romantic hero. W. O. Raymond discusses the problems which Browning is facing in these early poems:

Throughout Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello, he has probed with an unsparing hand the cancer of romantic egoism, with its passionate, unbridled impulses of limitless self-assertion, its scorn of all relative accomplishment,¹¹ and its tendency to seek refuge in vague abstractions.

While Browning recognizes the importance of the transcendental hero, he emphasizes that the true hero must be able to place his infinite gleam into a finite reality in order that others, less gifted than the hero, may be inspired to a higher level of moral action.

Between 1841 and 1846, Browning published a variety of poetry in the Bells and Pomegranates series. Most noticeable in this series is Browning's experimentation in technique. Instead of attempting to approach the finite through the infinite transcendental vision, as he had tried to do in Sordello, the poet, through his experiments, attempts to present an infinite gleam through a very finite and limited means. He appears to have abandoned the attempt to grasp the "pure white light" of the transcendental vision in favour of presenting the "prismatic hues" which make up that light. In Pippa Passes, the first pamphlet of the series,

¹¹W. O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 163.

Browning examines an artist who is in but not of reality, who obviously sings God's song with effective but unintentional results. Pippa Passes is particularly interesting when viewed as a reaction against, and a complement to, Sordello.

When Browning published Saul in Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845), only the first nine lyrics were written; the poet still had not solved all the problems of the transcendental hero. By 1855, however, the poet was able to affirm and conceptualize the poetic process through the symbol of the Incarnation. In Saul, Browning traces his own poetic development in the figure of David, and the young shepherd's vision of the Incarnation of Christ can be interpreted as Browning's own vision of affirmation in the poetic process.

In the early poems, we see Browning attempting to come to terms with Romanticism, aspiration, and the problems of the transcendental hero. The early Romantic poets had emphasized the development of a transcendental hero who could find ideal truths in a supernatural world, but Browning was more concerned with the hero who could reconcile these idealistic truths to a realistic milieu. This process is of primary importance to Browning, for it is the means by which the transcendental hero can retain vital contact with humanity, and this is the central issue and recurring theme of the early poetry.

CHAPTER II PAULINE: THE FRAGMENT OF A CONFESSION, 1833

Browning's first published poem was anonymously presented to the public when the poet was only twenty-one years of age, but not a single copy sold, and he suppressed the poem until 1868. Only after D. G. Rossetti read it in the British Museum and wrote to Browning in Italy to ask if the poem was his, did Browning acknowledge Pauline and publish it in his Collected Works.¹ It seems that Pauline was conceived, not as a poem which would stand by itself, but as a part of a larger collection in a grandiose scheme of Browning's which would have also included a novel and an opera; Pauline was to be the poem of the group.²

Many critics maintain that Pauline is a spiritual biography of Robert Browning up to 1833, and certainly several of the traits of the persona of the poem are remarkably similar to Browning himself. The poem may have been suppressed for several reasons--the poor reviews, the immaturity of style, the confusion of ideas, or perhaps the almost shameful nature of the persona's obsession with the self, particularly if the speaker is, in fact,

¹The details of Pauline's publication, although interesting, are not essential to this study. The following critics can provide the reader with any required information regarding background details and Browning's attitude to the poem: W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1955); W. Irvine and P. Honan, The Book The Ring and The Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974); Ioan Williams, Robert Browning (New York: Arco Publishing Co., Inc., 1970).

²DeVane, 41.

Robert Browning.

In spite of its immaturities, Pauline was a remarkable accomplishment for the young poet. Not only is it filled with many beautiful descriptive passages, but the poem also reveals to the reader the problems that Browning was trying to solve concerning the nature of the hero. The dissatisfaction with Romanticism that Browning expresses in the poem is characteristic of the whole Victorian reaction against the early nineteenth century. In his article, "Mill and Pauline", Miyoshi comments on the importance of the poem in this age of transition:

"Pauline" is one of the most fascinating documents in early Victorian poetry, combining as it does residual Romantic impulses to transcend or flee with clear evidence of the new Victorian posture of acceptance of reality, or, more nearly, descent into it.³

In Pauline we see Browning focusing on the transcendental hero's isolation and the hero's attempts to bridge the gap between the self and society. In order to understand how Browning was grappling with the role of the hero, we must examine these aspects of Pauline: the influence of Shelley on Browning, the Pauline poet's attempts to overcome his obsession with the self, and the nature of his victory. Finally, we must conclude by trying to assess Browning's development in the poem and deciding what criteria, if any, he did establish for his hero from this fragment of a confession.

³M. Miyoshi, "Mill and Pauline," Victorian Studies, IX (1965-1966), 159.

In 1826 Browning obtained a copy of Shelley's Miscellaneous Poems from his cousin James Silverthorne, and the profound influence of Shelley is clearly reflected not only in Pauline but in much of Browning's poetry.⁴ After avidly reading Queen Mab, he declared himself both an atheist and a vegetarian; the former horrified his mother, a devout Christian, and the latter caused the deterioration of his eyesight. Irvine and Honan suggest that one of the reasons for Browning's fervent adoration of Shelley was the striking similarity between the two poets:

[In Shelley, Browning] found not only his own world and time, but his own thoughts and feelings, even his own dreams and experiences, expressed with quite breathtaking and unfamiliar freshness and beauty. ... For psychologically, Shelley is strikingly like the youthful Browning.⁵

Browning's initial excitement with and acceptance of Shelley were replaced by a growing disillusionment with his idealistic and utopian dreams, and Pauline records how Browning could no longer "walk calm" with Shelley's spirit. This poem is probably modelled after "Alastor" and "Epipsychidion", but Pauline is a curious mixture of disillusion with and praise for Shelley. Browning rejects the introspective and idealistic

⁴For a more detailed study of Shelley's influence on Browning see the following: R. A. Duerksen, Shelleyan Ideas In Victorian Literature (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966); C. Keenan, "Browning and Shelley," Browning Institute Studies, I (1973), 119-145; F. A. Pottle, Shelley and Browning (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965).

⁵Irvine and Honan, 16.

nature of the Romantics, but although he distrusts Shelley's atheism and utopianism, he continues to praise him. The result is that Pauline conveys a sense of betrayal, on Browning's part, for his youthful idol.

In the "Suntreader" passages of Pauline, Browning acknowledges his debt to Shelley:

Sun-treader, life and light be thine forever!
Thou art gone from us; years go by and spring
Gladdens and the young earth is beautiful,
Yet thy songs come not, other bards arise,
But none like thee: they stand, thy majesties,
Like mighty works which tell some spirit there
Hath sat regardless of neglect and scorn,
.....

But thou are still for me who have adored
Tho' single, panting but to hear thy name
Which I believed a spell to me alone,
Scarce deeming thou wast as a star to men!

(151-157, 168-171.)

As the poem continues, the Pauline poet renounces Shelley's idealism and asserts a dependence on God, but at the conclusion of the poem he returns to praise Shelley:

Sun-treader, I believe in God and truth
And love; and as one just escaped from death
Would bind himself in bands of friends to feel
He lives indeed, so, I would lean on thee!
Thou must be ever with me.

(1020-1024.)

Although this poem suggests the poet's rejection of introspection, the persona's victory does not seem credible when viewed with this ambivalent acceptance of Shelleyan idealism, coupled with a determination to "look within no more". From Pauline, it is

obvious that Browning is unable to clearly resolve his attitude towards either God or Shelley.

In Pauline, Browning's attitude to Shelley is confused, and this confusion can be attributed partially to the poet's dissatisfaction with Romanticism and partially to his inability to affirm a new definition of the concept of the hero. While Browning was fascinated with Shelley's Prometheus figure and accepted the importance of the transcendental hero, he departed from the Shelleyan concept of the hero in several areas. Browning felt, like other early Victorians, that the Romantic hero, because of his noble aspirations for the Absolute and his desire to fulfill the self, isolated himself from the rest of humanity, and thus led a meaningless existence. Nevertheless, he did admire Shelley's fervent idealism, while realizing at the same time that the hero must not live wholly within his transcendental experiences but must, as well, face reality and the finite conditions of life. Although he rejects the Romantic hero, Browning has not yet evolved a definition of the nature of the hero which would satisfactorily fulfill the needs of the early Victorians. Like so many of his contemporaries, Browning, at this time, is

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born, 6
With nowhere yet to rest my head.

Although he does finally renounce Shelleyan idealism and introspection, his debt to this poet is still great. As Irvine

⁶Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas From The Grande Chartreuse",
85-87.

and Honan write, this debt is largely related to Browning's new seriousness regarding the role of the poet:

Shelley taught Robert a good many things, but chiefly to be in earnest about ideas and to conceive the poet as a thinker and a prophet.⁷

Browning eventually became disillusioned with Shelley's aesthetic, yet he never lost his respect and admiration for this poet who had provided not only models and images for him to follow, but had also served as a catalyst and inspiration to his thought. In his Essay on Shelley, written in 1852 as an introduction to a spurious collection of Shelley's letters, Browning pays deep tribute to Shelley, and he calls his poetry a "sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal."⁸ Browning sees this concept, of providing a correspondence between the natural and the supernatural, as an important function of the poet, and the poet's ability to maintain this dual perspective is essentially the problem he is trying to solve in the early poetry.

The most outstanding feature of the Pauline poet is his despairing obsession with the self. In the poem, the speaker chronicles his spiritual growth, recording the emptiness and the

⁷Irvine and Honan, 16.

⁸R. Browning, "On The Poet Objective and Subjective; On Shelley as Man and Poet," Papers of the Browning Society, I (1881-1884), 18.

intellectual pride which resulted from his loss of purpose and his disillusion. All of these spiritual problems he attributes to an obsessive sense of self, and in this "aimless, hopeless state", the persona confesses his plight to Pauline:

O Pauline, I am ruined who believed
That though my soul had floated from my sphere
Of wild dominion into the dim orb
Of self--that it was strong and free as ever!
It has conformed itself to that dim orb,
Reflecting all its shades and shapes, and now
Must stay where it alone can be adored.

(89-95.)

After eulogizing Shelley as a seed of hope and inspiration for him, the speaker then "strip[s his] mind bare" to unveil his present state:

I am made up of an intensest life,
Of a most clear idea of consciousness
Of self, distinct from all its qualities,
From all affections, passions, feelings, powers;
And thus far it exists, if tracked, in all:
But linked, in me, to self-supremacy,
Existing as a centre to all things,
Most potent to create and rule and call
Upon all things to minister to it;
And to a principle of restlessness
Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all -
This is myself;

(268-279.)

The speaker claims the self as the centre of all existence, and such a claim can provide the reader with some insights into Browning's thought at this time. Certainly it is obvious throughout the poem that the persona views this self-obsession with despair and guilt, for extreme introspection is, at this point, the central problem for Browning. Although introspection is a

necessary step in the transcendental process, the poet realizes the danger of permitting it to get out of control.

With the exciting discovery of Shelley, who, he believed, held the "key to a new world", the speaker is inspired with new hope. This hope, however, is short-lived; just as the hero of Shelley's "Alastor" is forced to look at reality, so is the speaker of Pauline shattered by the realization that he cannot reconcile Shelley's idealism to reality. Here Browning is exploring the possibility of Shelleyan idealism as a means of moving out from the self. The speaker recalls his fervent dedication to Shelley:

I threw myself
To meet it, I was vowed to liberty,
Men were to be as gods and earth as heaven,
And I--ah, what a life was mine to prove!
My whole soul rose to meet it. Now, Pauline,
I shall go mad, if I recall that time!

(424-429.)

Under Shelley's inspiration, the persona had decided to become a poet, but he failed because he lacked a central purpose-- "I had an impulse but no yearning--only sang." (375-376). The result was a lack of control and again, more pride. Shelley's utopian idealism was not a successful means of overcoming the self:

I dreamed not of restraint, but gazed
On all things: schemes and systems went and came,
And I was proud (being vainest of the weak).

(398-400.)

After rejecting Shelley's idealism, the speaker plans to "look on real life", but again his hopes are frustrated, and he returns to a state of egoism, where he fluctuates between despair

and joy. At last, he claims victory through faith in God.

Shelleyan idealism had provided inspiration for the persona, but had not supplied a purpose and a means. Like Sordello, he lacks an objective outside of himself for which to strive. Because of his self-centered nature, the Pauline poet has no central purpose, for he has not yet learned the importance of communicating his infinite gleam to others. The dilemma of the persona is that he cannot maintain a dual perspective, nor can he relate his infinite vision to a finite reality. Although he plans to confront reality, this confrontation is shallow because he does not attempt to reconcile the infinite to the finite, and thus can find no satisfaction with a finite reality. His assertion of faith in God is meaningless.

The crux of Pauline lies in the speaker's attempts to move out from the self before he smothers in egotism, and in the last part of the poem, the persona gradually approaches a new and lasting hope.⁹ It is in this section that we see Browning attempting to bridge the gap between the real and the supernatural as he searches for some means of affirmation. After rejecting the intuitive inspiration of Shelleyan idealism, the poet explores two more possibilities, love and empirical knowledge, and

⁹Miyoshi has divided Pauline into three sections: 1) the speaker's despair, 1-317; 2) history of the self, 318-559; 3) gradual approach to hope, 560-1031. Although my study is focusing on the alternatives Browning is exploring to escape self-obsession, Miyoshi's divisions are useful as a framework from which to study the poem.

these two possibilities can be seen as Browning's own attempts to work out a process by which the transcendental hero can avoid severing his contact with humanity.

The central problem of the Pauline poet, in fact the central problem of all Browning's early poetry, is the frustration of being unable to fit an infinite vision into a finite reality. This failure is largely caused by the hero's inability to move out from the self. In the experience of the transcendental vision, the hero's soul, which is otherwise "confined to clay", takes flight. In his initial rejection of Shelley, however, when the speaker declares he will look only at reality, his soul is frustrated by the confines of the finite body:

I cannot chain my soul: it will not rest
In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere:
It has strange impulse, tendency, desire,
Which nowise I account for nor explain,
But cannot stifle, being bound to trust
All feelings equally, to hear all sides:
How can my life indulge them? yet they live,
Referring to some state of life unknown.

(593-600.)

Browning is emphasizing the importance of the transcendental vision to satiate the persona's soul, for empirical knowledge can never be totally satisfying. The Pauline poet, because he is capable of a transcendental experience, is understandably frustrated with a finite reality, but this is because he cannot maintain a dual perspective; he cannot reconcile the infinite and the finite. The speaker does realize, however, that in order to successfully solve this problem, the first step is to re-establish

contact with humanity, and this he attempts to do.

Having failed to overcome his isolation through Shelleyan idealism, the speaker then unsuccessfully attempts to move out from the self through love for Pauline. This mysterious woman, to whom the poem is addressed, is a combination of mother, lover, and guardian angel,¹⁰ and the suggestion that Pauline is, in reality, an early love of Browning's, perhaps Eliza Flower, is not really significant to her role in the poem. Although the speaker addresses her throughout the poem, it is obvious that he is far too concerned with his own problems to possess any sincere devotion for her. In fact, the poem is much more the fragment of the persona's confession than it is the story of his love for Pauline.

The only occasion where the reader learns anything about Pauline, is in Browning's puzzling footnote to line 811, where she addresses the reader. The nature of her statement prompts the reader to ask two questions: why a footnote? and why in French?. Probably the motive behind the footnote is related to the fact that the poem is concerned not with Pauline but with the speaker, and Browning wishes to emphasize that, so totally is the speaker involved with his own confession, there is no room in the poem for Pauline. This idea is certainly in keeping with the persona's complete egoism. The reason for the change in language is puzzling, but perhaps Browning was attempting to add a cosmopolitan and

¹⁰Irvine and Honan, 26.

intellectual aura to the poem, or perhaps he was trying to suggest that Pauline is a French rationalist, and therefore a counter-balance to the Germanic transcendental hero. The footnote itself does not appear to be of any particular significance to the focus of our present study and will not be examined.¹¹

What is important about the relationship between the speaker and Pauline is that he neither can, nor does, love her. He addresses her at the beginning of the poem:

Thou lovest me;
And thou art to receive not love but faith.
(42-43.)

Later, the persona admits that he "can love nothing." DeVane records Mill's criticism of the speaker's relationship to Pauline:

I should think it a sincere confession, though of a most unlovable state, if the 'Pauline' were not evidently a mere phantom. All about her is full of inconsistency--he neither loves her nor fancies her, yet insists upon talking love to her. ¹²

Thus, in Pauline, it is obvious that the hero does not resolve his dilemma by successfully loving another person; he must explore another alternative.

After he fails to overcome his isolation through either the intuitive inspiration of Shelley, or love for Pauline, the

¹¹For a critical analysis of the Footnote, see Miyoshi, 162 ff.

¹²DeVane, 42.

narrator determines to abandon idealism, and to solve the problem through facing reality:

'Twas my plan to look on real life,
The life all new to me; my theories
Were firm, so then I left, to look and learn
Mankind, its cares, hopes, fears, its woes and joys.
(441-444.)

Through a "craving after knowledge", the poet hopes to find fulfillment but, like the hero in Browning's next poem, Paracelsus, he discovers that empirical knowledge cannot be totally satisfying to the soul's spiritual growth. The persona is disillusioned with finite knowledge; his soul aspires to the infinite and he is not able to reconcile the two.

The hero of Pauline hungers for a unity with God or the infinite, but is frustrated and dissatisfied with the finite. Browning does emphasize that, however high man's aspirations are, he must accept his limitations, for to aspire selfishly to a god-head is to be guilty of Faustian pride. The persona's motives are purely selfish, for he seeks only to gratify his own desires, and has already admitted that he does not love Pauline. While searching for "one rapture all [his] soul can fill", the hero is forced to the realization that he "cannot be immortal, taste all joy."

At the conclusion of the poem, the Pauline poet suddenly has a vision where he is made aware of God: "the clear, dear breath of God that loveth us"(789). The hero then renounces his despairing egotism:

No more of the past! I'll look within no more.
I have too trusted my own lawless wants,
Too trusted my vain self, vague intuition.

(937-939.)

The hero is consoled by the security of God's love, for he realizes that his visions are "each a part of some grand whole" that he cannot hope to understand, and that his job as poet is to chronicle the stages of life for "life is truth and truth is good."

Although the speaker in Pauline does affirm some kind of victory at the conclusion of the poem, the consistency of this victory is questionable. Browning has not focused clearly on the issues of the poem, and his affirmation is unsatisfactory, for he has not adequately solved the problems. For the Pauline poet to superficially declare that God has pointed out his errors to him and then proceed merrily on his way, certainly leaves many unanswered questions for the reader to ponder. The sincerity of Browning's conclusion has been examined by several scholars, but Mill's analysis seems to express most clearly the reader's dissatisfaction with the victory:

The self-seeking and self-worshipping state is well described--beyond that, I should think the writer had made, as yet, only the next step, viz. into despising his own state. I even question whether part of that self-disdain is not assumed. He is evidently dissatisfied and feels part of the badness of his state; he does not write as if it were purged out of him. If once he could muster a hearty hatred of his selfishness it would go; as it is, he feels only the lack of good, not the positive evil. He feels not remorse but only disappointment. ...

Meanwhile he should not attempt to show how a person may be recovered from this morbid state,--for he is

hardly convalescent, and "what should we speak of but that which we know." ¹³

Although Mill is perhaps too severe in his criticism of the young poet, many of his points regarding the poem are valid. If we could compare Browning's Pauline to Carlyle's spiritual autobiography, Sartor Resartus, it would seem fair to say that the Pauline poet has asserted the 'Everlasting No', and is floating in the 'Centre of Indifference', unable, like his counterpart Teufelsdröckh, to assert an 'Everlasting Yea'. The paleness of the Pauline poet's victory is inherent in Browning's own uncertainty. The confusion surrounding the hero of the poem is the result of the poet's confusion and inability to assert a sincere victory over self-obsession. Irvine and Honan make this comment concerning the hero of the poem:

The hero of Pauline is a rather bewildering montage of real, daydream, and literary Brownings who coalesce after the manner of The Nude Descending A Staircase. And as the hero is the poem, this surrealist complexity extends to theme and treatment. An aesthetic and spiritual autobiography leads up to a rather pale and regretful victory of intuition and Christian faith over reason and Shelleyan free thought. ¹⁴

For Browning, the problem of the transcendental hero remains and, although several issues have been isolated and examined in Pauline, the poet is still unable to clearly define the process by which the transcendental hero can put the infinite within the

¹³Ibid., 46.

¹⁴Irvine and Honan, 33.

finite. Nevertheless, Pauline is important to this study for several reasons: Browning acknowledges his debt to Shelley, but establishes his dissatisfaction with Romanticism; although still unresolved about how to avoid extreme introspection, he does maintain that the transcendental vision is essential in man's spiritual development; Browning identifies the role of the poet with the transcendental hero; and, probably most important of all, Browning realizes that too much introspection causes isolation of the self, a disastrous side effect of transcendentalism. His primary objective is to move out from the self, and the possible ways of accomplishing this are closely examined. Even though the Pauline poet fails to eliminate his self-consciousness through either a love of Pauline, or a pursuit after knowledge, whether empirical or intuitive, his very attempt to re-establish contact with humanity is crucial. It provides evidence to the reader that Browning, even at the tender age of twenty-one, has substantially moved away from his Romantic predecessors. Although few of these issues are actually resolved in Pauline, Browning does isolate the problems, and lays important groundwork for future poems. Two years later, with the publication of Paracelsus, he is able to examine these issues with more clarity, and to probe more deeply into the nature of the heroic figure.

CHAPTER III PARACELSUS, 1835

The publication of Paracelsus in 1835 shows a marked improvement in Browning's poetic development. He has corrected many of the technical flaws illustrated in Pauline: he has both avoided the confessional atmosphere with its excessive subjectivity, and focused more sharply on his issues. Browning again examines the problem of reconciling infinite aspiration and ambition to life's finite limitations. He also probes the objectives of the transcendental hero and the motives behind his insatiable thirst to "know all", and points out the deadly flaw of isolationism. Finally, in Paracelsus, Browning, besides touching on the nature of epistemology, looks at the relationship between knowledge and love, and how the two can and must be fused. All of these issues are not only themes of Paracelsus, but are central to Browning's own examination of the nature of the hero.

Like Pauline, Paracelsus is largely autobiographical:

We may read, with caution, a good deal of the character and aspirations of the young Browning in Paracelsus. The poem, like Pauline, has much autobiography in it; but it is also something of a young man's prospectus on life--he sends Paracelsus and Aprile like spies before him into the strange land. Paracelsus has many of the traits of his creator.

Browning has, however, attempted to avoid the excessive subjectivity of Pauline by using a semi-dramatic structure. He

¹W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), 50.

expresses his ideas through four characters, two of them major, and uses a five-act structure. Choosing a historical rather than an imaginary character also affords the poet greater objectivity. As in his next work Strafford, Browning indicates that Paracelsus is a psychological study ("action in character rather than character in action"), but, unlike the drama, it is a poem and is not intended for the stage. In the Inscription of Paracelsus to Amédée de Ripert-Monclar,² Browning makes this quite clear:

I am anxious that the reader should not, at the very outset,--mistaking my performance for one of a class with which it has nothing in common--judge it by principles on which it was never moulded, and subject it to a standard to which it was never meant to conform. ... I have endeavoured to write a poem not a drama.

(Inscription, 1-4, 15.)

Browning continues in his Inscription by advising the reader that the poem had only been "imagined six months" before its publication, and then, with a touch of ironic humour, he adds that another production "may follow in a more popular, and perhaps less difficult form." This "more popular" poem turned out to be the notorious Sordello, which devastated the public acceptance of Browning's poetry that had been promised by the success of Paracelsus. In Paracelsus, Browning continues from Pauline in his probing of the nature of the transcendental hero.

²Comte Amédée de Ripert-Monclar was a French Royalist associated with the Rothschild banking establishment, and it was he who first suggested the character Paracelsus to Browning as a subject. For more details, see DeVane, 50.

The problem of reconciling infinite aspiration and finite limitation is the central theme in Paracelsus. "In his excellent study of the poem, W. O. Raymond describes Browning's attempts to balance the two:

There are two characteristic attitudes of Browning's mind ... which are constantly reflected in his poems.

A deep conviction of the infinite potentialities of the soul, its transcendental origin and immortal destiny, is a primary element in his self-consciousness. Linked with this is a belief that the purpose of life is a continuous striving to surpass the limitations imposed upon the soul by the finite conditions of time and sense.³

Browning insists that the "finite as well as the infinite has a positive part to play,"⁴ and in Paracelsus, he attempts to come to terms with this dilemma, which he saw as the central problem of Shelleyan idealism.

The second major issue which Browning examines in Paracelsus concerns the objectives of the hero and the motives behind his insatiable thirst to "know all". One of the major drawbacks which Browning sees in the Romantic hero is his isolation of the self from the common bonds of humanity. Paracelsus deliberately severs his link with mankind and sets himself apart in order that he might attain his goal. He wants to commune with God, not with men. For Browning, however, human aspiration has to be

³W. O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 161.

⁴Ibid., 162.

directed towards a humanitarian goal, other than just self-gratification. To seek communion of the soul with God solely for the purpose of satisfying a self-centered aspiration is, although tempting, a totally unacceptable motive. While Paracelsus condescends to help mankind, this concession is secondary to his own selfish motives. J. Hillis Miller writes:

Like Prometheus or Phaeton he [Paracelsus] wants to seize and control this secret fire [God's infinite truth], and then, in casual condescension, to bestow its gifts on mankind.⁵

Because his aspirations are selfish, Paracelsus is guilty of an intellectual pride. Browning creates his Faustian hero from the historical Theophrastes Bombast von Hohenstein (ca. 1490-1541), the famous physician, alchemist, scientist, and professor of Renaissance Europe, who took the name Paracelsus to suggest that he was as great a physician as Celsus.⁶ Because of his intellectual pride and thirst for knowledge, Paracelsus has often been compared with Dr. Faustus, and there is enough evidence to suggest that Browning also had Faustus in mind when he wrote his poem.⁷

⁵J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 96.

⁶For more information on the background of Paracelsus and how Browning adapts this character to suit his poetic needs, see DeVane, 52-55.

⁷For a study of Faustus and Paracelsus, see Agnes Boswell Johnson, "The Faust Motif in Browning's Paracelsus," (diss., University of Colorado, 1957).

In Paracelsus, Browning also examines the nature of epistemology and the relationship between knowledge and love. The Pauline poet had "env[ie]d him whose mind turn[ed] with its energies to some one end," and in his next poem, Browning further explores this theme. Paracelsus turns all of the energies of his mind towards aspiring to "know all". In his desire for "forbidden knowledge", he scorns both human love and human limitation. In Part II, Paracelsus learns from Aprile not to scorn love, but up until the end of the poem he still disdains finite limitations. This disdain of humanity in effect causes his failure in his ability to love because, had Paracelsus really been able to love his fellow men, he might have been more successful in his aspirations. Somehow, knowledge and love must be fused. Although Paracelsus explains to Festus and Michal in Part I that truth comes from within, he still turns his life endeavours towards the gathering of empirical knowledge, believing that, because he has been 'chosen' by God, he can do no wrong. Browning always emphasizes the importance of intuitive knowledge, but it is also significant that he gives empirical fact, gathered from finite observation, a place in his aspiring for truth. Paracelsus, however, is unwilling to work contentedly through these finite means in his aspirations for infinite truth.

In an examination of the five Parts of Paracelsus, it will become clear to the reader how, through his study of the development of the protagonist, Browning has attempted to resolve these three issues: the motives and objectives of the transcendental

hero, the relationship between knowledge and love, and the reconciliation of infinite and finite.

In Part I, Browning looks at the motives and objectives of the hero. The reader is immediately exposed to Paracelsus' immense intellectual pride. As a young man he feels that God has chosen him in some special way. Even though Festus and Michal try to warn him of the dangers of such arrogance, Paracelsus is still determined to set himself apart from others in order that he might "know all":

Dear Festus, hear me. What is it you wish?
That I should lay aside my heart's pursuit,
Abandon the sole ends for which I live,
Reject God's great commission, and so die!
.....

Accordingly, I venture to submit
My plan, in lacking of better, for pursuing
The path which God's will seems to authorize!

(I, 140-143, 171-173.)

Part I continues as a debate between Michal and Festus on the one hand, and Paracelsus on the other. While the loving husband and wife suggest that Paracelsus is guilty of Faustian pride and an unnatural desire for god-like knowledge, Paracelsus defends himself by proclaiming that he has been chosen by God ("too intimate a tie/ Connects me with our God!" I, 359-360).

Paracelsus aspires to the infinite, but he refuses to accept finite limitations and means; he wishes to commune only with God and not maintain his link to man. Though he may in some way help humanity through his aspirations, this is only secondary

to the hero:

If I can serve mankind
'Tis well; but there our intercourse must end:
I never will be served by those I serve.

(I, 612-614.)

Paracelsus' aim is to "contemplate undazzled some one truth."

Festus exposes the hero's selfishness when he points out the motives behind his aspiring to know "the secret of the world,/

Of man and man's true purpose, path and fate," (I, 276-277):

You, if a man may, dare aspire to KNOW:
And that this aim shall differ from a host
Of aims alike in character and kind,
Mostly in this,--that in itself alone
Shall its reward be.

(I, 282-286.)

Paracelsus craves knowledge only for the sake of knowledge, and he has no central purpose other than his own egocentric motives. He wants to completely isolate himself from mankind. He refuses to work with others in his aspirations ("I reject and spurn them utterly/ And all they teach," I, 579-580), and wishes only to separate himself from the rest of men:

I must thenceforth die
Or elevate myself far, far above
The gorgeous spectacle.

(I, 458-460.)

The "restless irresistible force" within Paracelsus that motivates his aspirations, is corrupted and converted into a selfish pride which eventually ruins him. Festus exposes this blight which has invaded Paracelsus' soul:

Look well to this; here is a plague-spot, here,
Disguise it how you may! 'Tis true, you utter
This scorn while by our side and loving us;
'Tis but a spot as yet: but it will break
Into a hideous blotch if overlooked.

(I, 614-618.)

Browning presents Paracelsus as a completely self-centered individual who craves knowledge for its own sake, and in order to commune with God, and who, due to his overwhelming pride, wants to sever his ties with mankind. In his Faustian aspirations, he wishes to become equal with God and a "star to men".

In Part I, Paracelsus refuses to acknowledge the interdependence of knowledge and love. Although he claims to love Festus and Michal, it is obvious that he does not comprehend love and its many implications. Because of his pride and selfishness, he can love no one but himself, and he 'loves' Festus and Michal only in as much as they complement and feed his own egotistical nature. Festus recognizes that Paracelsus "know[s] not what love is," and warns him that his plans will fail for this very reason:

How can that course be safe which from the first
Produces carelessness to human love?

.

But do not cut yourself from human weal!
You cannot thrive--a man that dares effect
To spend his life in service to his kind
For no reward of theirs, unbound to them
By any tie; nor do so, Aureole! No-.

(I, 619-620, 660-664.)

Festus' advice to Paracelsus foreshadows Part II when the hero realizes, after his encounter with Aprile, that he has failed because of his inability to love.

In Part I, Browning distinguishes between intuitive and empirical knowledge. Whereas intuitive knowledge leads to infinite truth, empirical fact reveals the finite and earthly. Paracelsus proclaims that it is intuitive knowledge which reveals Truth to man:

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fulness; and around,
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear perception--which is truth.
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it, and makes all error: and to KNOW
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without.

(I, 726-737.)

Paracelsus plans to search for empirical knowledge in order to free the intuitive truth from the finite bounds of the flesh:

I go to gather this
The sacred knowledge, here and there dispersed
About the world, long lost or never found.

(I, 785-787.)

Paracelsus desires to transcend his immediate environment so that he can come closer to the infinite truth for which his soul craves. For this hero, finite knowledge is important only as a key to release innate knowledge from within. Browning, however, stipulates that both are important, and Paracelsus' over-concern for the infinite causes him to scorn and under-estimate the importance of the finite. Paracelsus sees the body only as a prison of the soul, not as the complementary entity that it should be.

Again in Part III, Browning further distinguishes between these two kinds of knowledge:

I possess
Two sorts of knowledge; one,--vast, shadowy,
Hints of the unbounding aim I have pursued:
The other consists in many secrets, caught
While bent on nobler prize,--perhaps a few
Prime principles which may conduct too much:
These last I offer to my fellows here.

(III, 923-928.)

The intuitive knowledge, gleamed from a transcendental experience, is still the aim of Paracelsus' aspirations, but he does not yet recognize the need to share this infinite gleam with others through finite means.

In Part II, Paracelsus comes very close to the realization that the world's secrets lie in the acceptance of finite limitations. On the verge of this discovery, however, he meets Aprile, and, inspired by the poet whose message he misinterprets, Paracelsus once more reverts to his quest for the infinite.

Part II opens in 1521, and begins with a lengthy monologue by the hero. He looks over his past: "amid the scrawled/ Uncouth recordings of the dupes of this/ Old arch-genethliac, lie [his] life's results!" (II, 23-25). He has made a few 'successful' discoveries but is still unhappy, and wonders whether his aspirations have been too high:

The fragmentary produce of much toil,
In a dim heap, fact and surmise together
Confusedly massed as when acquired; he was
Intent on gain to come too much to stay
And scrutinize the little gained.

(II, 30-34.)

Paracelsus is on the verge of discovering that he should have been content with the imperfections of a finite world:

to dare unnerve
My harassed o!ertasked frame, to know my place,
My portion, my reward, even my failure,
Assigned, made sure forever! To lose myself
Among the common creatures of the world,
To draw some gain from having been a man.

(II, 71-76.)

Paracelsus realizes that Festus was correct: he should not have cut himself off from mankind, for the "plague-spot" of pride had indeed swollen into a "hideous blotch". Paracelsus' aspirations for infinite knowledge had caused him to scorn man and to isolate himself, and this in turn had destroyed his ability to love:

I ne'er engaged to root up loves so frail
I felt them not; yet now, 'tis very plain
Some soft spots had their birth in me at first,
If not love, say, like love: there was a time
When yet this wolfish hunger after knowledge
Set not remorselessly love's claims aside.
This heart was human once.

(II, 120-126.)

In his determined search for an infinite truth which had "flit[ted] and wink[ed]" and beckoned him from unconquerable peaks, Paracelsus had isolated himself and had scorned the finite; now, partially recognizing his error, he asks God to end his life.

The appearance of Aprile in Part II is important to the hero's development. From this poet, Paracelsus learns that his own failure had been caused partially by his forsaking of love. Aprile, like Paracelsus, had sought the infinite; only he had wished to "love all" and had excluded knowledge:

[Par:] I am he that aspired to KNOW: and thou?
Aprile: I would LOVE infinitely, and be loved!
.....

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

(II, 384-385, 388-393.)

Aprile, a Shelleyan idealist, had been an artist, and had moved from the basic art of sculpture, through painting and poetry, up to the loftiest art form of music, in his search for "eternal infinite love".⁸ He had planned to reach the ultimate in love, and then to die:

Last, having thus revealed all I could love,
Having received all love bestowed on it,
I would die.

(II, 480-482.)

Like Paracelsus, Aprile had scorned the finite, and now, on his deathbed, he attempts to reveal to Paracelsus the importance of the limited and finite:

Knowing ourselves, our world, our task so great,
Our time so brief, 'tis clear if we refuse
The means so limited, the tools so rude
To execute our purpose, life will fleet,
And we shall fade, and leave our task undone.
.....

for common life, its wants
And ways, would I set forth in beauteous hues.

(II, 497-501, 556-557.)

⁸In his essay (*supra* n. 3), Raymond examines Aprile's progression through these four art forms when he traces the poet's rise from material to spiritual. Music, the most subtle art form, is symbolic of the infinite. See 164 ff.

Both Paracelsus and Aprile had searched for the transcendental ideal, the one solely through intellectual paths, the other through only aesthetic means.

On his deathbed, Aprile realizes that the world to which he aspired has to be reconciled to the world of reality, and, although he tries to convey this, Paracelsus completely misinterprets his message; the hero thinks he has failed only because of his inability to love:

We wake at length from weary dreams; but both
Have slept in fairy-land: though dark and drear
Appears the world before us, we no less
Wake with our wrists and ankles jewelled still.
I too have sought to KNOW as thou to LOVE-
Excluding love as thou refusedst knowledge.
.
Are we not halves of one dissevered world,
Whom this strange chance unites once more? Part? never!
Till thou the lover, know; and I, the knower,
Love.

(II, 620-625, 634-637.)

Part II ends with Paracelsus' realization that love and knowledge must somehow be fused, but the hero has still failed to learn the importance of the finite conditions of life. The hero's objectives are still selfish and egotistical, and he has not yet learned to reconcile the infinite and the finite.

Part III opens five years later (1526); Paracelsus is a professor in Basel. There is a marked change in the character of the hero. He recognizes his failure, but instead of accepting the limitations of the finite, he is bitterly disillusioned, and still scorns mankind.

In an attempt to 'love' his fellow man, Paracelsus has taken a teaching position, but, although he shares the imperfect knowledge that he possesses, he cannot control his scornful pride:

'tis part of my proud fate
To lecture to as many thick-skulled youths
As please, each day, to throng the theatre,
.....
Why strive to make men hear, feel, fret themselves
With what is past their power to comprehend?

(III, 148-150, 229-230.)

The contempt that Paracelsus displays for others is foiled by the characters Festus and Michal. Although Festus is a 'lesser' character than the hero (his capacities and aspirations are only faint shadows of Paracelsus' nobility), the husband and wife share a perfect love ("a quiet and peculiar light/ like the dim circlet floating round a pearl," III, 25-26). Paracelsus, because of his pride, cannot hope to possess such a love. His concept of love is still self-centered and prideful, and thus he has failed in his attempt to fuse knowledge and love.

When Paracelsus realizes his failure, his aspirations become soured, and although he still bitterly aspires to the infinite, he scorns the finite. He cannot face the present and revels only in his past aspirations and successes. He is both unhappy and bitter:

I have not been successful, and yet am
Most miserable.

(III, 256-257.)

Paracelsus no longer challenges and aspires nobly to an infinite truth, yet without this aspiration, his life is meaningless and empty, and this underlies Browning's insistence on the importance of aspiration. While the poet disapproves of unrealistic striving, it is still essential that man, while realizing and accepting the limitations of the finite, not set his goals too low. The experience of aspiration is more important than the individual's success or failure.⁹ The tension between aspiration and achievement troubled Browning in the early part of his career, and he attempted to understand why individuals with noble aims and greater potential (i.e., heroes such as Paracelsus and Sordello) were somehow greater, even though they failed, than those individuals who set lower goals and achieved them (common men such as Festus and Eglamour).

Paraclesus, although he is disillusioned with his failure, is still determined "to know":

 my life still tends
As first it tended; I am broken and trained
To my old habits: they are part of me.
.....
I still must hoard and heap and class all truths
With one ulterior purpose: I must know!

(III, 671-673, 705-706.)

Paracelsus is both condemned and saved by his aspirations. He

⁹For a closer examination of the theme of aspiration in the mid-nineteenth century, see Henry Klomp's doctoral dissertation, "The Idea of Aspiration in Early and Mid-Victorian Literature," (University of Michigan, 1952). Klomp looks specifically at Paracelsus 724 ff.

still craves the infinite, and herein lies the key to his salvation; he aspires! Nevertheless, his fate is doomed because he seeks to know only for the sake of knowledge, not to teach others; his objectives are still selfish. He wishes to be only a seer, not a "Maker-See".¹⁰ Paracelsus' problem is also Browning's dilemma at this stage of his poetic career. The poet has not been able to balance the infinite and the finite in his own poetic development although he did recognize the importance of both. Like Paracelsus and the Pauline poet, he is frustrated by his failure to overcome isolation of the self.

While Paracelsus bitterly bemoans his fate, Festus suggests to him that "there is yet another world to mend/ All error and mischance," (III, 1010-1011). Paracelsus, rather than accept that this world might also be important and that this life might "make the next life more intense,"¹¹ completely rejects the finite in favour of the infinite world:

¹⁰Browning finally develops the nature of the true hero as a "Maker-See" in Sordello. See Ch. IV for further discussion.

¹¹In his later poem "Bishop Blougram's Apology", Browning explores more fully the suggestion that this world is a 'training ground' for the next but that we must fully live our lives in this world. He writes:

I act for, talk for, live for this world now,
As this world calls for action, life and talk--
.....

Why lose this life i' the meantime, since its use
May be to make the next life more intense?

(769-770, 778-779.)

Another world!
And why this world, this common world, to be
A make-shift, a mere foil, how fair soever,
To some fine life to come? Man must be fed
With angels' food forsooth; and some few traces
Of a diviner nature which look out
Through his corporeal baseness, warrant him
In a supreme contempt of all provision
For his inferior tastes.

(III, 1011-1019.)

Part III ends with Paracelsus still rejecting his link to humanity:

Love, hope, fear, faith--these make humanity;
These are its sign and note and character,
And these I have lost !

(III, 1028-1030.)

The hero still has not learned what Aprile had tried to convey to him: that he must accept human limitations. Like the Pauline poet, Paracelsus, at this stage of his development, cannot satisfactorily maintain a dual perspective of the infinite and the finite.

In Part IV, "Paracelsus Aspires", the reader sees Paracelsus as a drunken cynic. It has been only two years since Festus had encouraged Paracelsus to "strive again", but now the hero, disillusioned and skeptical, strives only for death. He has been exposed as "a most egregious quack" and has been dismissed from his teaching post because he had dared to teach 'truth' not knowledge:

I must needs begin
To teach them, not amaze them, "to impart
The spirit which should instigate the search
Of truth."

(IV, 93-96.)

In a semi-cynical, yet partially sincere, manner, Paracelsus explains to Festus that he is once more going to aspire to his early aims, but that he is going to try a new approach:

The aims--not the old means. You know they made me
A laughingstock; I was a fool;

.....

This is my plan--(first drinking its good luck)--
I will accept all helps; all I despised
So rashly at the outset, equally
With early impulses, late years have quenched:
I have tried each way singly: now for both!
All helps! no one sort shall exclude the rest.
I seek to know and to enjoy at once.

(IV, 183-184, 234-240.)

The tone of Paracelsus' new claims for aspiring is both hollow and bitter. He seeks only the "meanest earthliest sensualist delight/ That may be snatched;"(IV, 244-245). The lofty aspirations of his youth have degenerated into a remorseless effort to grab at some form of superficial joy. Paracelsus spitefully ridicules both himself and other men. He cannot sincerely re-establish his link with mankind and work contentedly through finite means, while still maintaining his noble aspirations. Because he is still selfish and does not love his fellow men, the hero can find no satisfaction and meaning in his earthly life.

In the song that he sings to Festus, Paracelsus recognizes that he has been deluded and that his aspirations have been purely selfish. The song is, in some ways, a parable of his own life:

A hundred shapes of lucid stone!
All day we built its shrine for each,
A shrine of rock for everyone,
Nor paused till in the westering sun
We sat together on the beach

To sing because our task was done.
When lo! what shouts and merry songs!
What laughter all the distance stirs!
A loaded raft with happy throngs
Of gentle islanders!
"Our isles are just at hand," they cried,
.
Oh, then we awoke with sudden start
From our deep dream, and knew, too late,
How bare the rock, how desolate,
Which had received our precious freight:
Yet we called out--"Depart!"

(IV, 500-510, 515-519.)

Like the men in his song who had "withered in their pride," Paracelsus realizes that he too has built shrines only to the glory of his own soul and that such selfishness has caused his failure. He, like the sailors, is helpless to change his state, for "gifts, once given, must here abide." The tragedy is that, although he can objectively diagnose his sickness, Paracelsus cannot effect a remedy. Because of his overwhelming despair, he cannot act on his insights.

In spite of his shortcomings and his failure, Browning still distinguishes Paracelsus from other men. He is somehow superior, and Festus comments on these heroic traits:

There are old rules, made long ere we were born,
By which I judge you. I, so fallible,
So infinitely low beside your mighty
Majestic spirit!--even I can see
You own some higher law than ours.

(IV, 638-642.)

Paracelsus is that type of individual who, although he cannot adjust to finite reality, displays certain enviable and heroic traits. In his early poetry, Browning examines the function

Part V records Paracelsus' death. The scene is a cell of a hospital in 1541, and the hero, at the end of his life, calls Festus to his side to impart truth to him, in much the same way that Aprile had earlier confided in Paracelsus. Just before his death the hero has a transcendental experience, a moment of illumination, in which he is capable of grasping the total meaning of existence. This, he tries to convey to Festus as he dies, finally successful in the attainment of his aspirations. In this final scene, Browning draws all of his ideas together as he reconciles man to God, the finite to the infinite, and knowledge to love.

Paracelsus is no longer the proud and selfish man of his youth. His former rejection of mankind and scorn for finite knowledge has been replaced by a humble sincerity, and he asks Festus to bury him in an inconspicuous, unmarked grave:

Dear Festus! I will kneel if you require me,
Impart the meagre knowledge I possess,
Explain its bounded nature, and avow
My insufficiency--whate'er you will:
I give the fight up: let there be an end,
A privacy, an obscure nook for me.
I want to be forgotten even by God.
But if that cannot be, dear Festus, lay me,
When I shall die, within some narrow grave,
Not by itself--for that would be too proud--
But where such graves are thickest; let it look
Nowise distinguished.

(V, 359-370.)

With the coming of his death, Paracelsus is able to overcome his isolation from mankind; he tells Festus that "we shall all be equal at the last," (V, 373). Paracelsus' embracing of mankind and accepting of his own humanity, are the first steps in his

salvation. His objectives, no longer selfish, are humble and sincere.

In Part V the reader also realizes that Paracelsus has revised his attitude towards love. In his transcendental experience he realizes that "God, thou art love!" (V,51), and he understands the importance of Aprile's message:

I learned my own deep error; love's undoing
Taught me the worth of love in man's estate,
And what proportion love should hold with power
In his right constitution; love preceeding
Power, and with much power, always much more love.

(V, 854-858.)

Paracelsus realizes that if God is Love, then human love must be a reflection of divine love; thus, through love, man can embrace the divine.

The most illuminating aspect of Paracelsus' new insight is his realization of the nature of the infinite and the finite, and of aspiration and achievement. Although God is infinite and human love is a reflection of divine love, it is essential that man, while striving for the infinite, accept his finite and limited condition. Man must aspire, but he cannot wholly attain in this life. God's glory does not depend upon man's attaining perfection, but rather, that man give glory to God through his imperfect means and gradually progress towards perfection. This attitude is in keeping with the "dynamic organicism" and the early-nineteenth-century Romantic emphasis on change, diversity, imperfection, and growth.¹²

¹²See Ch.I, p.2 for a discussion of "dynamic organicism".

Because man progresses as a collective unit, rather than individually, the hero's isolation of the self is disastrous, and the individual's attainment of the infinite is meaningless if he cannot "make others see" as well. Browning's attitude reflects the early Victorian shift away from the individual and towards a social consciousness of men as a whole rather than man as an individual. Paracelsus tells Festus:

For these things tend upward, progress is
The law of life, man is not Man as yet.
Nor shall I deem his object served, his end
Attained, his genuine strength put fairly forth,
While only here and there a star dispels
The darkness, here and there a towering mind
O'erlooks its prostrate fellows: when the host
Is out at once to the despair of the night,
When all mankind alike is perfected,
Equal in full-blown powers--then, not till then.

(V, 742-751.)

A spark of the infinite, or the divine, is within all creatures:

--how God tastes an infinite joy
In infinite ways--one everlasting bliss,
From whom all being emanates, all power
Proceeds; in whom is life forevermore,
Yet whom existence in its lowest form
Includes.

(V, 643-648.)

This passage foreshadows Browning's later use of the Incarnation, by which both the infinite and the finite are contained in one (i.e., Christ is both God and man).

Paracelsus is one of those individuals who is capable of aspiring to the infinite and gleaning truth through an intuitive

instinct; he is one of Browning's heroic figures. Because of Paracelsus' superiority, he is correct when he says, "God speaks to men through me" (V,558), however, his task is not to strive by himself towards communing with God, but to relay his infinite gleam to other men. In Paracelsus, Browning still has not determined how it is possible for the transcendental hero to accomplish this. By 1840, however, with the publication of Sordello, he has finally concluded that it is the poet who can be a "Maker-See", and that the poet must work through the finite conditions of this world, the many "beauteous hues" which comprise the "white light" of infinity.

Throughout Part V, Paracelsus attempts to explain to Festus the insights which he has gained, and, as he dies, he symbolically forms a bond between Festus, Aprile and himself:

Festus, let my hand--
This hand, lie in your own, my own true friend!
Aprile! Hand in hand with you, Aprile!
(V, 905-907.)

Both Aprile and Paracelsus had attained the finite goals for which they had strived, but these goals had been false. Aprile had sought Love while Paracelsus wanted Knowledge, and Browning shows that the two goals must be fused, and that both must accept the imperfections of the finite:

Knowledge--not intuition, but the slow
Uncertain fruit of an enhancing toil,
Strengthened by love: love--not serenely pure
But strong from weakness, like a chance-sown plant
Which, cast on stubborn soil, puts forth changed buds
And softer stains, unknown in happier climes;

Love which endures and doubts and is oppressed
And cherished, suffering much and much sustained,
And blind, oft failing, yet believing love.

(V, 696-704.)

In Paracelsus, Browning has worked out many of the problems that he had encountered in Pauline, and this poem is probably most important as a statement of the poet's understanding of aspiration and achievement. In Paracelsus, however, Browning also examines more closely the nature of the hero and the frustrating dilemma of the individual who, though gifted with a gleam of the infinite, must work contentedly through finite means. By 1835, the poet had not yet overcome the problem of putting the infinite within the finite, yet he did recognize the necessity of doing so. The solution was to come five years later in Sordello when Browning recognizes that a transcendental hero, to have a meaningful existence, must also be a "Maker-See". It was not until even later in his career that Browning himself could successfully be a "Maker-See" through the dramatic monologue form.

CHAPTER IV SORDELLO, 1840

The publication of Sordello in 1840 is the focal point of Browning's poetic development. In this poem, he finally establishes the importance of the transcendental hero as a poet or "Maker-See". Through the character of Sordello, he traces the development of the failed transcendental hero, and examines the nature of the true poet. Sordello expresses more clearly, than any other poem of the time, Browning's transition from a Romantic to a Victorian philosophy. Daniel Stempel comments on the mixture of Romantic and Victorian sentiments which is especially apparent in this poem:

Browning's poetic creed was ... a recognition and acceptance of the limitations imposed by experience on the romantic will toward the infinite. Like the earlier romantics he affirmed the existence of that will and paid homage to it; but, like his contemporaries, Carlyle, Tennyson, Huxley, and Ruskin, he also insisted that infinite will be translated into finite action, no matter how insignificant.¹

Sordello is an important poem for several reasons: as an expression of the transition from Romantic to Victorian trends of thought; as an examination of several early Victorian themes including the function of the artist and his isolation from society, the failure of language to express perception, and the role of the creative imagination versus the role of experience; as a unique experiment in poetic technique; as an expression of Browning's own aesthetic development; and finally, contrary to the opinion of many scholars,

¹D. Stempel, "Browning's Sordello: The Art of the Makers See," PMLA, 80 (1965), 560.

as a challenging and beautiful poem in itself, which merits a thorough study and appreciation by the reader. Thus, Browning's tale of a twelfth century troubadour is really a comment on, generally, early Victorian society and its philosophies, and, specifically, on the development of Robert Browning as thinker and poet.

After several years of careful study, writing, revisions, and interruptions, Browning brought Sordello to the presses in 1840.² The poem was greeted by the public with a mixture of puzzling bewilderment and suppressed ridicule, and made Browning the laughingstock of literary circles until 1868, when he was able to expiate himself with The Ring and the Book. Even now, Sordello is mercilessly persecuted. Critics generally take one of two approaches to the poem: either Sordello is dismissed with a witty quip of condemnation³ or, what is even worse, the poem is completely ignored. That there are faults in this poem is undeniable. Sordello is difficult to read, and the obscurities in both style and

²For a comprehensive examination of Browning's stages in writing Sordello and for the details of the various copies of the poem, consult W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1955), 72-85. DeVane records that, during the years of composition, there were actually four different versions of Sordello and that the final result was a "conglomeration of all these conceptions."

³Sordello has gained a certain degree of notoriety among scholars, and there have been many quips recorded condemning the poem. One of the more famous is Tennyson's remark that there were only two lines in the poem that he understood, the first and the last, and that neither of these were true. (These two lines are: "Who will may hear Sordello's story told" and "Who would has heard Sordello's story told.").

subject can discourage the most determined reader. However, in spite of these faults, Sordello can be a challenging and fulfilling poem for the reader who is willing to take the time to appreciate its many fine qualities. As A. J. Whyte, one of the most distinguished and just Sordello critics, comments:

The difficulties and faults of Sordello are so patent that one is apt to forget its great and undeniable beauties. ... Even a first reading reveals beauties unsurpassed by anything he wrote afterwards. Not only are the descriptions of the places and people incomparable, but we get priceless lines and couplets that become a joy to the discoverer, but which at⁴ present lie like gems embedded in an untouched soil.

The difficulties of Sordello, which have caused the poem to be neglected and scorned, can be attributed to two main sources: the subject matter and the style. Unfortunately, Browning's readers were not as familiar as he himself was with the confusing period of Italian Renaissance history that is the basis of the subject matter of the poem. The feuds, treaties, battles, and intrigues of the city states during the Guelf-Ghibelline struggle are a labyrinth of tangled melodramas. The time period in the poem, up until Sordello's death, covers the period from 1194 until 1224, although this too can be confusing. The 'present' of the poem is 1224 and all the other events are technically flashbacks. The time sequence is bewildering for other reasons as well. The poem starts in 1224 with news of the capture of Richard of Boniface (a Guelf) by Taurello Salinguerra (a Ghibelline), and then flashes back to 1194 to sketch in the first twenty years of Sordello's

⁴A. J. Whyte, Sordello (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1913), 9.

life at Goito. Book II traces the next ten years (1214-1224) when Sordello is a troubadour in Adelaide's Court. Then, the remaining four books, with the exception of the digression in Book III, cover the last three days of Sordello's life.

Even with a thorough knowledge of Italian history, the reader might have problems understanding sections of Sordello, for Browning did not adhere strictly to historical fact. The events in the poem are factual, but the characterization is mostly imaginative.⁵ Browning's view of the value of history is interesting. Although he chooses his characters and events from history (in Sordello, Paracelsus, The Ring and The Book and other poems), he does not adhere strictly to historical fact but freely adapts and alters history to suit his poetic purposes.⁶ Sordello then, is not solely a history poem, although in order to understand the poem, the reader must arm himself with a certain amount of knowledge of Italian history.

⁵For a more thorough examination of the historical aspects of Sordello, see either DeVane or Whyte.

⁶This selective use of historical data is an interesting feature of several nineteenth-century poets and reflects a changing attitude which these thinkers placed on historical fact. Several scholars have examined nineteenth-century attitudes to history, and the reader may refer to any of the following for more information: E. Bentley, A Century of Hero-Worship (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957); J. H. Buckley, The Triumph of Time (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1966); H. A. Docherty, "Browning's Use of History, Its Effect on Meaning and Structure in his Poetry" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1961); W. E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

For those able to overcome the obscurity of subject matter in Sordello, another challenge awaits: unravelling Browning's style. The poet's exploitive use of parentheses, interjections, asides, subordinate clauses, inversions, dashes, etc., often obliterates his meaning. His poetic syntax is weighted with obscure references and digressive comments which can further distort his thought and confuse the reader. The poem is almost six thousand lines long, and it seems much longer because of Browning's density in thought and language. Whyte suggests that there is a constant onus on the reader to expand the poem:

...Sordello presents difficulties of style which are as great as, if not greater than, anything he ever wrote. The first and most conspicuous of these is abnormal condensation.... All through the poem ... expansion has to be made by the reader, and unfortunately it is only familiarity with the⁷ story generally which gives us facility in so doing.

Browning's obscure style is a major fault of the poem, yet he did not attempt to clarify himself in any way with the revisions he later made to the poem. This might suggest that many of these obscurities are deliberate, and that in Sordello, Browning is experimenting with a new narrative technique by attempting to fuse his structure and theme. Indeed, some have viewed the style of Sordello, not as one of its drawbacks, but as one of its redeeming features:

The real achievement of Sordello is its organic unity of means and ends, the successful fusion of structure, style and language to unfold and develop Browning's

⁷Whyte, 5,7.

theme from germ to fruition.⁸

The "organic unity" of Sordello has been recognized as one of its most revolutionary features, although it has also earned the poet the rather uncomplimentary title of "semantic stutterer".⁹

The success of the form of the poem is open to debate, but it is important, when evaluating Sordello, to keep in mind the poet's purpose. Browning was attempting to present his subject matter from various perspectives, and to do so simultaneously! Hence, the parentheses, interjections, dashes, and other disjointed aspects of the poem. Browning, in an attempt to fuse his theme and form, was insistent that the reader see with Sordello, because that was the poet's task:

[Browning] was systematically trying to say everything at once. ... In its entirety Sordello is meant to embody a single whole perception.¹⁰

With Sordello, Browning tries to write a poem following the very rules that he urges Sordello to follow in the poem:

Fond essay!
Piece after piece that armour broke away,
Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
As language: thought may take perception's place

⁸Stempel, 557.

⁹See S. W. Holmes, "Browning: Semantic Stutterer," PMLA LX (1945), 231-255.

¹⁰W. Irvine and P. Honan, The Book The Ring and The Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974), 87-88.

But hardly co-exist in any case,
Being its mere presentment--of the whole
By parts, the simultaneous and the sole
By the successive and the many.

(III, 587-595.)

Thus, these two difficulties in Sordello, the subject matter and the style, though they may not be excused by the reader, can be explained, at least to some degree. Himself an expert in Italian history, Browning never fully realized the difficulty of his subject matter for his readers, and he may have chosen a rather mysterious hero such as Sordello, not only because he was the fore-runner of Dante, but because the little-known facts surrounding Sordello's life allowed Browning greater poetic freedom. The difficulties in style are related to the poet's attempts to fuse his theme and structure.

Even Browning, however, never denied the difficulties in Sordello. In the first line of the poem he challenges the reader that he "who will, may hear Sordello's story told," suggesting that the reader must actively participate in the poem in order to "hear" Sordello's story. Then, in the concluding lines, the poet admits that reading Sordello has been an exercise with its own peculiar rewards, but that the "after-gust" will fascinate the reader and make him return to the poem again and again:

Friends, be frank! ye snuff
Civet, I warrant. Really? Like enough!
Merely the-savour's rareness; any nose
May ravage with impunity a rose:
Rifle a musk-pod and 'twill ache like yours!
I'd tell you that same pungency ensures
An after-gust, but that were overbold.
Who would has heard Sordello's story told.

(VI, 879-886.)

In Sordello, Browning probes with even greater precision than in Paracelsus the tragedy of the man who would "know all". Sordello is a study of the failed transcendental hero because, although the hero is himself a seer, he cannot fit his infinite gleam into a finite reality, thereby making others see as well. Thus, he cannot fulfill his role as poet and live up to his heroic potential. Through the creation of Sordello, Browning traces the various stages of the soul's development in its aspirations for the ultimate, and its need to communicate with others. In his dedication of the poem to J. Milsand, Browning emphasizes that Sordello is concerned with the development of the soul:

The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of the soul; little else is worth study.¹¹

Certain aspects of the poem are autobiographical, but Browning goes far beyond his own poetic problems in the poem; he is writing a metaphysical and philosophical treatise on the nature and function of the true hero. He shows how Sordello, because of his selfishness and isolation, fails as a successful hero/poet. But this failure is a magnificent tragedy because the reader envies and admires Sordello for his vision; he is a true genius. Through a careful examination of Sordello's development throughout the six books of the poem, it will become clear to the reader how Browning has carefully created his transcendental hero who ultimately fails in his aspirations to become a successful poet.

¹¹R. Browning, The Dedication of Sordello, p.123.

Browning does not reject the value of the transcendental vision, but emphasizes that it alone is not adequate: only by sharing the vision with others and making them see, can the transcendental hero fulfill a useful function to mankind. Otherwise, the transcendentalist has a meaningless existence.

In the first book of the poem, Browning, after he has vividly set the scene at Verona in the heat of the Guelf-Ghibelline feud, flashes back thirty years to Sordello's youth at Goito. The poet makes it clear that, even as a youth, Sordello is a true genius, set apart from others by "the mark/ Of leprosy upon him." Although totally naïve concerning the nature of man, Sordello has a "touch divine", an overwhelming sense of beauty. In a description of the youthful hero, Browning captures his delicate and perceptive features:

His face
Look, now he turns away! Yourselves shall trace
(The delicate nostril swerving wide and fine,
A sharp and restless lip, so well combine
With that calm brow) a soul fit to receive
Delight at every sense.

(I, 461-466.)

In the "drowsy Paradise" of Goito, Sordello has no 'real-life' companions other than the old servants who care for him, so he makes nature his companion and absorbs into his soul the natural beauties around him:

Like the great palmer-worm that strips the trees,
Eats the life out of every luscious plant.

(I, 632-633.)

Because he has no friends, Sordello creates imaginary figures,

and since he himself is a genius who can grasp perfection, and has no one to educate him in the finite realities and limits of normal men, the "stream of life-like figures through his brain" is just as 'perfect' as he himself is. This is one of the reasons for Sordello's later disillusionment; the men and women of the real world are not as ideal as his fictitious playmates at Goito.

Another reason for Sordello's failure to cope with reality and help mankind, is related to his relationship with beauty. In a rather intricate passage, Browning distinguishes between two reactions to beauty. One type of person submerges his own identity within the larger beauty he sees around him:

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-

(I, 507-510.)

Another type of person, of which Sordello is representative, chooses to absorb external beauty into his own soul rather than to move out and submerge his own identity:

For there's a class that eagerly looks, too,
On beauty, but, unlike the gentler crew,
Proclaims each revelation born a twin
With a distinctest consciousness within,
.....
Who, from earth's simplest combination stamp
With individuality--uncrampt
By living its faint elemental life,
Dost soar to heaven's completest essence, rife
With grandeurs, unaffronted to the last,
Equal to being all!

(I, 523-526, 543-548.)

Because Sordello has no 'outer-soul',¹² with which to merge his own soul, he attracts and absorbs all external beauty to himself, with the result that he becomes completely self-centered. This egoism, Browning points out, is the very cancer of Romantic transcendentalism, and is the basis of the poet's rejection of the Romantic hero. Sordello lacks a 'moral sense'. Up until Book IV, he is not capable of helping, or even considering, other men because of his total selfishness. Then, after his transformation from egoist to altruist, he still fails, not only because he does not act, but because he even lacks a means of acting.

In Book I, Browning reveals how totally naïve his hero really is. Sordello has grandiose plans of perfecting mankind, and is determined to make his plans a reality:

"my soul
Hunting a body out may gain its whole
Desire some day!"
.....
Thus lives he: if not careless as before,
Comforted; for one may anticipate,
Rehearse the future, be prepared when fate
Shall have prepared in turn real men whose names
Startle, real places of enormous fames,
Este abroad and Ecelin at home
To worship him, -
.....
Compress the starriest into one star,
And grasp the whole at once!

(I, 835-837, 844-850, 854-855.)

Sordello fails to realize that between the conception and the

¹² Whyte suggests that Sordello failed because he could not synthesize his own soul with an external identity. See p. 33 ff.

deed there is a tremendous gap. Thus, when he attempts to transform his plans to reality, he becomes disillusioned and frustrated, not only because other people are not as great as he thought them to be, but also because he himself has shortcomings. At the end of Book I, Browning leaves Sordello with his egoistic dreams, awaiting the day when he shall encounter the "veritable business of mankind".

In Book II, Browning traces the hero's first exposure to "real men and women" in Adelaide's Court. In this book, we see not only the extent of Sordello's naïveté and selfishness, but also how much of a genius he really is. When Sordello stumbles into Adelaide's Court, he has mixed emotions regarding his initial exposure to mankind:

his youth
In its prime now--and where was homage poured
Upon Sordello? --born to be adored,
And suddenly discovered weak, scarce made
To cope with any, cast into the shade
By this and this. Yet something seemed to prick
And tingle in his blood; a sleight--a trick--
And much would be explained.

(II, 43-49.)

In this first encounter, Sordello is both frightened and challenged.

A. J. Whyte explains the above lines with this comment:

Sordello's first contact with humanity has a twofold effect. It produces on the one hand temporary confusion and a sense of weakness, such as would be expected in such a highly sensitized nature, while on the other it arouses the deeper feeling of a desire to lead, a sense of command, inherent in his character and capabilities.¹³

¹³Whyte, 94 (n.2).

Only when Sordello hears Eglamour's song, does he realize the extent of his own poetic abilities:

 he steadily at watch the while,
Biting his lip to keep down a great smile
Of pride: then up he struck. Sordello's brain
Swam; for he knew a sometime deed again;
So, could supply each foolish gap and chasm
The minstrel left in his enthusiasm,
Mistaking its true version--was the tale
Not of Apollo?

(II, 69-76.)

Although he hasn't yet learned to control his gift, Sordello, in a trance-like state, finishes Eglamour's song and then passes out. He regains consciousness to discover that he has become the new troubadour. Eglamour, while recognizing Sordello's superior gift, which he generously acknowledged by kissing Sordello's hand, has died from his defeat. Browning attempts to distinguish between Eglamour's capabilities and Sordello's genius. Eglamour is a lyric poet who is inspired by a sense of beauty; but his talent is not nearly as great as Sordello's genius, and at times he cannot do justice to his topic. For Eglamour, poetry is an end in itself and brings its own rewards, but for Sordello, poetry is only a means of expressing the depths of his own soul, for his motives for singing are purely selfish at this point. Browning's hero has not yet learned to bridge the gap between self and society, nor does he have any motivation to do so; Sordello wants only to satiate his own desires.

While realizing that he is both physically weak and of lowly birth (for so he thought), Sordello determines to gain the

worshipping reverence of others through his poetry, and he sets himself completely apart from common men. Again and again, Browning points out the egoism of Sordello's spirit. He can perceive nothing outside of his own soul:

That is, he loves not, nor possesses One
Idea that, star-like over, lures him on
To its' exclusive purpose.

(II, 395-397.)

This failure to identify with an external purpose or cause, eventually leads to Sordello's failure; the transcendental vision can only be of value if translated into a finite reality for others to perceive, and only an unselfish and humble soul can hope to accomplish this goal.

As in Book I, Browning shows that Sordello is not capable of distinguishing between thought and deed. Sordello plans everything in his mind, and thinks that this will guarantee its actual accomplishment:

But while the hour away--a pastime slight
Till he shall step upon the platform: right!
And, now thus much is settled, cast in rough,
Proved feasible, be counselled! thought enough,--
Slumber, Sordello! any day will serve.

(II, 465-469.)

Many of Sordello's naïve illusions are bluntly destroyed during his years as a troubadour, for he soon encounters problems. First, he has to cope with the technical problems of song-writing:

Then he found
(Casting about to satisfy the crowd)
That happy vehicle, so late allowed,

A sore annoyance; 'twas the song's effect
He cared for, scarce the song itself: reflect!

(II, 482-486.)

Unable to reconcile his own desires to the people's wants,
Sordello finally borrows verses from Eglamour, much to the delight of his 'common sense' critic Naddo, who is pleased to discover that the new troubadour is not, after all, perfect. In order to feed his vanity, Sordello finally sings only to entertain and to gain applause:

He caught himself shamefully hankering
After obvious petty joys.

(II, 547-548.)

Thus, instead of elevating mankind to his own high standards, Sordello succeeds only in lowering his own nature to a base level. He becomes angry with the people because they don't perceive the truth in his songs, and he can't understand why they don't transfer their adoration of the heroes in his ballads to himself, their creator. In the end, Sordello also becomes very disillusioned with his own failures, as he realizes the difference between Sordello the man (who needs to satisfy his vanity through applause), and Sordello the poet (who has such noble aspirations of elevating man). Finally, broken-hearted, he returns to Goito, because he has "lost the art of dreaming." There, in the natural and isolated landscape, he regains his former nature:

Heart and brain
Swelled; he expanded to himself again.

(II, 963-964.)

In Book II, Browning illustrates how Sordello's vision becomes debased when he lets his vanity and selfishness come first. Because of his self-centered nature and naïveté concerning the nature of man, he is unable to transform the infinite truth which he can so readily perceive, into a finite reality for others to share. By the conclusion of Book II, Browning has exposed the fatal selfishness of the Romantic transcendental hero. At this point the poet has clearly expressed his dissatisfaction with Romanticism. The remainder of Sordello traces his gradual evolving of a new concept of the heroic figure, a concept that can satisfy the early Victorian needs. Sordello must overcome his isolation from other men, and he must somehow acquire a social conscience in order to be a successful "Maker-See".

Book III is divided into two sections, both of which deal with the nature of the transcendentalist and the true poet. The first part is devoted directly to Sordello's story and records his return to Goito and his recovery. Goito is set apart from civilization, and there, "suspended life begins anew" for the hero, as the "stain of the world has forsaken him." In this section, Sordello ponders the reasons for his failure as a troubadour and for his unhappiness. Here Browning skilfully uses a ladder metaphor to illustrate Sordello's higher aspirations:

Ah, fragments of a whole ordained to be,
Points in the life I waited! what are ye
But roundels of a ladder which appeared
Awhile the very platform it was reared
To lift me on?

.....

Whatever seemed
Progress to that, was pleasure; aught that stayed

My reaching it--no pleasure. I have laid
The ladder down; I climb not; still, aloft
The platform stretches!

(III, 141-145, 152-156.)

Sordello realizes that the nature of the common person's happiness is related to achievement of aspired goals. Ordinary men, because their goals are lower, achieve happiness and are satisfied, but Sordello has aspired to a much higher goal, and is frustrated because he has failed to attain it. As we have already seen in Paracelsus, Browning closely examines the theme of aspiration in his early poetry. Sordello, like Paracelsus, possesses true heroic qualities even though he fails to attain his goals. In his later poetry, Browning emphatically points out the importance of aspiration: "A man's reach should exceed his grasp/
Or what's a heaven for."¹⁴ Sordello finally realizes that happiness can be gained only by adjusting his ideals to actual experience and, with this realization, his hope is once more renewed; he determines to try again.

Although Sordello's hope has been restored, Browning has already foreshadowed his ultimate failure. His hero has failed to act at a crucial point, and the opportunity, once gone, is lost forever. To illustrate this concept, Browning makes an analogy between Sordello's initial failure and an earthquake, but then he rejects the comparison:

And here was nature, bound by the same bars
Of fate with him! "No! youth once gone is gone:

¹⁴"Andrea del Sarto", 97-98.

Deeds, let escape, are never to be done.
.....

Nature has time, may mend
Mistake, she knows occasion will recur;
Landslip or sea breach, how affects it her
With her magnificent resources? --I
Must perish once and perish utterly."

(III, 92-94, 98-102.)

Nature, like Sordello, had been overcome by unforeseeable forces,
but Nature, an eternal process, could repair the damage with time,
whereas Sordello had only one chance, which lost, was gone forever.

In spite of this foreshadowing of his failure, Sordello is
still determined to act, and when Naddo brings him a message from
Palma, he goes to Verona. There, Palma reveals to him her love
and her plans to make him leader of the Ghibelline party.

Lawrence Poston has made an interesting study of the
value which Browning places on political involvement.¹⁵ Browning
leaves Sordello in Book III debating whether or not to become
involved in political intrigue, and this question of involvement
becomes even more crucial in Book V when Taurello throws the
baldric of political leadership upon Sordello's shoulders. Pos-
ton maintains that Sordello's ultimate rejection of political
involvement reflects Browning's own judgment of politics:

The rare, truly heroic figures of Browning's poetry
are those who transcend the political obsessions of their
culture and decisively assert their own best selves.¹⁶

¹⁵ L. Poston III, "Browning's Political Skepticism: Sordello
and the Plays," PMLA, 88(March 1973), 260-270.

¹⁶ Ibid., Abstract, 196.

In his explanation of Sordello, Poston suggests that "the poet must accept social responsibility without succumbing to the lure of political involvement and that the acceptance of that responsibility will free him as an artist."¹⁷ Poston's thesis is interesting in view of Sordello's ultimate rejection of political involvement, although in his article he has not clearly distinguished between political involvement and social responsibility. Such a differentiation is essential, for Browning, in his concept of the hero as a "Maker-See", stresses the hero's social consciousness. In Book III, Browning leaves Sordello on the verge of accepting political action as a means of realizing his social responsibility. The refusal of the baldrick, while it does support Poston's thesis, might also suggest that, only in this situation, due to Sordello's circumstances, is political action not an acceptable solution. Or, perhaps Sordello's failure is caused partially by his failure to accept political leadership.

The second half of Book III (from line 593 until the end) appears to be a long digression on the function of poetry and the question of inspiration; in reality, it is very closely related to the rest of the poem. Browning's conclusions in this section can be directly applied to Sordello's situation. In this part of the poem, the poet muses on his "transcendental platan" (the unfinished poem) in the public square of Venice, and he chooses for his inspiration, not the pretty peasant girls, but the allegorical figure of sinful and suffering humanity:

¹⁷Ibid., 264.

You sad dishevelled ghost
That pluck at me and point, are you advised
I breathe?

(III, 696-698.)

Browning goes on to point out that, because the world is a mixture of good and evil, happiness and unhappiness, the poet's cause must be for the salvation of this suffering segment of humanity. To accomplish this aim, the poet must be completely unselfish and humble, and at this point, Sordello is neither. He wants to help mankind not for man's sake but to boost his ego.

Browning divides all men into three categories:

For the worst of us to say they so have seen;
For the better, what it was they saw; the best
Impart the gift of seeing to the rest.

(III, 866-868.)

A poet belongs to this third category, and his function is to 'make others see'--to reveal the truth and show man to himself, for the purpose of elevating mankind to a higher level of existence.

Sordello is capable of an infinite transcendental vision, but in order to be a successful hero/poet, he must also be a "Maker-See":

Warped souls and bodies! yet God spoke
Of right-hand, foot and eye--selects our yoke,
Sordello, as your poetship may find!

(III, 781-783.)

Browning suggests here, that the poet's task is to "yoke" the infinite and the finite. Sordello has yet to accomplish this goal, and the reader leaves him in Book III trying to decide if political action is the proper vehicle for poetical truth. His

ultimate failure is, however, foreshadowed both by his self-centered and naïve nature and by his inability to act. In the last half of this Book, Browning clearly establishes the role of the true hero as an individual who can "impart the gift of seeing to the rest." This concept, once established, shadows the remainder of the poem. Sordello, although he is gifted with a gleam of the infinite, fails, because he is not a "Maker-See".

In Book IV, there is an important transformation and development in Sordello's character: he changes from an egoist to an altruist. This transformation is partially caused by the horrors of war with which he is confronted upon his arrival in Ferrara. He is appalled by the suffering that he sees everywhere. Browning uses the metaphor of two lovers quarreling over a lady to describe the siege on Ferrara:

Meantime Ferrara lay in rueful case;
The lady-city, for whose soul embrace
Her pair of suitors struggled, felt their arms
A brawny mischief to the fragile charms
They tugged for--one discovering that to twist
Her tresses twice or thrice about his wrist
Secure a point of vantage--one, how best
He'd parry that by planting in her breast
His elbow spike--each party too intent
For noticing, howe'er the battle went,
The conqueror would but have a corpse to kiss.

(IV, 1-11.)

For the first time in his life, Sordello's eyes are opened to the pitiful misery of man's condition. Ferrara has been reduced to a ravaged battleground. A soul as sensitive and perceptive as Sordello's cannot help but be deeply moved by what he sees, and he experiences a complete transformation:

the more he pried,
The less became Sordello satisfied
With his own figure at the moment.
.....

effect a happiness
By theirs,--supply a body to his soul
Thence, and become eventually whole
With them as he had hoped to be without-
.....

And the new body, ere he could suspect,
Cohered, mankind and he were really fused.

(IV, 191-193, 202-205, 250-251.)

For the first time, Sordello feels his link with humanity, and when "he felt / An error, an exceeding error melt," he rejects his former motives for helping mankind and now wholeheartedly adopts the cause of the people, a cause that Browning had emphasized in Book III had to be the primary cause of the true hero/poet.

This change of heart in Sordello does not, however, ensure his success, for he still has many illusions about the harsh realities of life, and has yet to act on his convictions. Even though he has accomplished one victory by overcoming his selfishness, he is by no means a successful hero. Sordello naïvely believes that one of the political parties must be 'right' and the other 'wrong', and that all he has to do is to discover "which of the two Powers shall bring/ Men good." When Sordello goes to see Salinguerra, he is staggered by the truth, that all of this strife and suffering is caused not by pure and high ideals, but by selfishness, greed, corruption, and jealousy:

Scarce an hour had past
When forth Sordello came, older by years

Than at his entry. Unexampl'd fears
Oppressed him, and he staggered off, blind, mute
And deaf, like some fresh-mutilated brute,
Into Ferrara--not the empty town
That morning witnessed: he went up and down
Streets whence the veil had been stript shred by shred.

(IV, 332-338.)

Sordello is completely disillusioned at this point, and after wandering aimlessly through the streets of Ferrara, he talks with Palma, and begs her to tell him that "there must be laws at work/ Explaining this" and that "good may lurk / Under the bad."

In spite of his disappointments, Sordello is still determined not to give up his aim, and so conceives a third cause, apart from the Guelfs and Ghibellines, which, he feels, will liberate the people:

A cause, intact, distinct from these, ordained
For me, its true discoverer.

(IV, 951-952.)

Sordello is inspired by the story of Crescentius who had re-established the consulate in Rome for a brief interval from 980 to 998. Not heeding the warning from the story (that Crescentius had been unable to defeat either the Church or the Emperor), he dreams of building his own new Rome:

Let us have Rome again! On me it lights
To build up Rome.

(IV, 1025-1026.)

Book IV ends with the transcendental hero still building 'castles in the air', because he has neither recognized the reality of the situation, nor taken any concrete action towards realizing

his aspirations.

During the course of Book V, all of Sordello's illusions concerning the reality of man's condition are completely shattered. Even as he dreams of his new Rome, Sordello realizes the impracticality of the scheme, and the pillars of his "eternal city" drop "arch by arch". There is too much work to be done before a new Rome can be built and

to one task, one time,-
No leaping o'er the petty to the prime.
(V, 51-52.)

Sordello looks back over his life and realizes that he has failed to 'seize the moment'. He has viewed everything in terms of the completed plan, and has not concerned himself with the importance of doing the actual deed:

God has conceded two sights to a man--
One, of men's whole work, time's completed plan,
The other, of the minute's work, man's first
Step to the plan's completeness:
.....
That last step you'd take first?--an evidence
You were God: be man now! Let those glances fall!
(V, 85-88, 96-97.)

Sordello has been gifted with this amazing transcendental vision, and can thus grasp "man's whole work", but he has not used this gift to guide men in the "minute's work". Thus he does not fulfill the hero's task of "coalesc[ing] small and great." Although a seer, Sordello is not a "Maker-See".

Browning further illustrates this important concept by tracing the three ages of man. The first stage in man's development

was the age of Charlemagne, an age dominated by sheer strength and force. This period was followed by the age of Hildebrand when a spiritual dimension was added to this basic strength.

Browning then describes the third age, not yet reached, when the mere knowledge that a thing is right will ensure its performance.

Sordello, born out of his time, belongs to this third stage.

The hero is once more caught in the snare of Shelleyan idealism.

Because of his potential for attaining the infinite, Sordello has progressed beyond the level of a normal man, to this third stage in man's development. His higher level of existence is meaningless, however, for man progresses collectively, and if Sordello cannot instigate other men to a higher level of moral action, then he has failed to live up to his heroic potential. The transcendental hero's function is to guide others less gifted than himself.

In Book V, Sordello has another confrontation with Salin-guerra, this time to persuade him to take up the Guelf cause. Sordello believes that the Church's party is, at least ideally, more spiritual and universal than the Ghibelline party. Browning develops Taurello Salinguerra, Sordello's real father, as a direct antithesis to Sordello. Salinguerra is a man of action, always ready to 'seize the moment' and to do the "minute's work". He won't take the leadership of the Ghibelline party because he recognizes that he is not a leader but a follower. His throwing of the baldric upon Sordello's shoulders symbolizes Browning's own thoughts concerning the relationship of strength and knowledge:

Thought is the soul of act, and stage by stage,
Soul is from body still to disengage
As tending to a freedom which rejects
Such help and incorporeally affects
The world, producing deeds but not by deeds,
Swaying, in others, frames itself exceeds,
Assigning them the simpler tasks it used
To patiently perform till Song produced
Act, by thoughts only, for the mind.

(V, 567-575.)

Had Sordello and his father been able to work together, they would have "garnished Strength with Knowledge", but this was not to be the case. Sordello refused to take action and accept the baldric which would have made him head of the Ghibelline party.

In Book V, Sordello reiterates what the narrator had stated in Book III: that "a poet must be earth's essential king." His task must be undertaken for the people's good, to guide them in their everyday actions towards the elevation of mankind (that is, the gradual progression of man to a higher level of existence). Sordello fails because he "overleaps" the actual work which must be done. In Book V, the hero develops to the extent that he can grasp both the infinite and the finite, but he is not a "Maker-See". Sordello, perhaps like Browning himself, has a dual perspective but cannot reconcile the one to the other.

In Book VI, Browning manipulates the time sequence and backtracks to the moment when Sordello is left alone in Salinguerra's chamber with the proffered baldric. In this flashback, Sordello's thoughts are exposed to the reader. He debates whether or not to accept the political leadership. In this Book, Browning provides further clues as to the cause of the hero's failure.

Sordello has failed to synthesize his ideas and has lacked a cause for which to strive:

The real way seemed made up of all the ways--
Mood after mood of the one mind in him;
Tokens of the existence, bright, or dim,
Of a transcendent all-embracing sense
Demanding only outward influence,
A soul, in Palma's phrase, above his soul.

(VI, 36-41.)

Sordello has been "without a function" and this, Browning suggests, is partially the cause of his failure. His energy has been wasted. Because Sordello can perceive of nothing outside of himself, he has no external reality to which he can relate.

Sordello fails also because he refuses to accept the importance of the "minute's work", and instead, sees only in terms of the accomplished deed. In lines similar in thought to Carlyle's work ethic,¹⁸ Browning emphasizes the importance of menial work:

(as yet
He, had unconsciously contrived forget
I' the whole, to dwell o' the points ... one might assuage
The signal horrors easier than engage
With a dim vulgar vast unobvious grief
Not to be fancied off, nor gained relief
In brilliant fits, cured by a happy quirk,
But by dim vulgar vast unobvious work
To correspond...).

(VI, 147-155.)

¹⁸ Carlyle constantly maintained the dignity of work. In Sartor Resartus, he urges his readers to "Know what thou canst work at" and "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh wherein no man can work." Like Browning, Carlyle also exposes the Victorian dissatisfaction with Romanticism. When he urges his readers to "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe," Carlyle shows his contempt for the paralyzing effects of Byronism (the age of Kraft-männer) and offers an alternative with the practical idealism of Goethe.

For, who sits alone in Rome?

The ultimate tragedy of Sordello is that the transcendental vision by itself is valueless and that, in spite of the hero's genius, his gifts are lost to mankind.

To accept the badge was to prostitute his soul, to pander to ignorance and injustice, to betray the cause entrusted to him by the people. 19

¹⁹Whyte, 265.

doing something. Also, Sordello, like Browning perhaps, may have been unwilling to compromise or jeopardize in any way the beauty of his transcendental vision, by chopping it into a finite reality. Browning's failure to clearly cope with this issue suggests that, at this point in his poetic career, he himself had not solved the problem.

Sordello's fate at the conclusion of the poem is no surprise. In an explosive transcendental experience, his soul, already aesthetically overdeveloped, expands to encompass all truth. Because his body is finite and unable to expand to such an infinite dimension, he dies:

the sudden swell
Of his expanding soul showed Ill and Well,
Sorrow and Joy, Beauty and Ugliness,
Virtue and Vice, the Larger and the Less.

(VI, 467-470.)

Sordello had failed to "fit to the finite, his infinity." After his death, Browning concludes the poem by quickly recounting the outcome of the Guelf-Ghibelline struggle and Taurello's fate.

Browning leaves the reader with the final image of a peasant child, "barefoot and rosy", singing the "unintelligible words" of one of Sordello's songs. This closing image could be significant for several reasons. Note that the words are "unintelligible", suggesting the complete failure of Sordello's aspirations. On the other hand, his songs are still being sung; he has not completely faded into oblivion, and perhaps one day someone may be able to interpret Sordello's meaning. The image

could take on ironic dimensions if it is only one of the hero's court songs, composed to gather cheap praise from the people. I believe, however, that the image is an affirmative one, for the lyric is being sung by a peasant child. In some way, Sordello has communicated with the poor Italian peasants, those people that, in the end, he was so determined to help. Also, this final image leads into Browning's next poem which is certainly a reply to Sordello: Pippa is indeed a "peasant child, barefoot and rosy", singing God's song.

Sordello is a tragedy, but although he is unable to fulfill his function, the hero is not a total failure. He himself was capable of an infinite transcendental vision, and Browning emphasizes the importance of this vision to the hero/poet. Sordello had aspired to a higher truth, and although he failed to achieve his goal, the reader still admires him for his aspirations. As we saw with Paracelsus, it is better to aspire than to achieve. Also, Sordello had not compromised his infinite vision and had not lowered his standards by stooping to meddle in political intrigues.

When evaluating Sordello as a success or failure, we must also take into consideration Browning's own 'seed of act' theory. Briefly, the poet felt that the intentions of a person were equally as important as his actual achievements. In "Rabbi Ben Ezra" he writes:

What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me.

(40-41.)

Later, in The Ring and The Book, Browning deals with this subject again in the Pope's monologue:

it is the seed of act,
God holds appraising in his hollow palm,
Not act grown great thence in the world below.

(271-273.)

If this 'seed of act' criterion is applied to Sordello, then we must conclude that he is not a failure at all. Sordello, after his transformation in Book IV, was anxious to serve mankind; he then failed because his aspirations were too high, and because he was uneducated in the means of serving. Sordello wanted to elevate mankind, but he did not know how to accomplish his aim.

Whyte suggests that, had Browning understood and embraced the concepts of Christianity, then he would not have encountered this problem of an infinite/finite gap:

What Sordello needed was the teaching of the New Testament. In the Christian ideal of service, he might have found that "moon" which would have drawn the full forces of his soul into a single channel and given to him the sense of proportion which above all else he needed. Nothing else would have satisfied him and this he was denied. ... He died while still looking for that higher synthesis in which the appalling contradictions of life might be reconciled. ²⁰

Whyte's suggestion is only partially satisfactory, although Browning does later adopt Christianity. In Christmas Eve and Easter Day, the poet shows how even the possession of a Christian faith is not the whole answer. A means to act must be discovered.

²⁰ Ibid., 33.

The poet finally develops the "prismatic hues" of his dramatic monologue form in order to convey the "pure white light" of infinity to a finite reality. Later in his poetic career, Browning does turn to the Christian symbol of the Incarnation to embody this aim of the hero/poet, and it was this aspect of Christianity that particularly appealed to the poet.

In Sordello, Browning focuses with greater precision than in Pauline and Paracelsus on the problems which faced the transcendental hero: that of communicating infinite vision through finite means. Roma King has made the following observations on the various stages of Sordello's development:

Each stage in development causes him to recognize as an illusion one more of the principles on which he has tried to structure his life: romantic nature, pure art, abstract thought, social and religious institutions, political action. His sense of isolation and frustration increases until, finally, faced with an apparent impasse, he breaks under the tension.²¹

Through these various stages of Sordello's development, Browning traces his own poetic growth. By the end of the poem, while still acknowledging the all-importance of the transcendental vision, the poet appears to have come to an impasse in his own approach. Like Sordello, he has failed to "fit to the finite, his infinity." With the lesson of Sordello, the poet changes his approach. He writes in his Essay on Shelley:

For it is with this world as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves:

²¹R. A. King Jr., The Focusing Artifice (Athens: Ohio university Press, 1968), 24.

the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned.²²

After Sordello, Browning attempts to convey infinite truth from a finite starting point. In his book, The Disappearance of God, Miller suggests that it is this change which leads Browning into his dramatic monologue form:

Though Browning cannot ape God's infinitude there is one way he can approach God's fullness and that is through a certain kind of poetry. The direct way to God has failed. Now Browning must turn to the peripheral way, not the way but the way around. He must enter in patient humility, the lives of the multitudes of men and women who make up the world and he must re-create these lives in his poems.²³

In spite of its disastrous reception, Sordello paves the way for the successful period of Browning's poetic career. DeVane suggests that Sordello, "like a storm cleared the poet's spirit,"²⁴ and freed Browning from many of his earlier conflicts:

Indeed, in his first three long poems, Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, we see the young man trying to put himself right with God and his world, but most of all seeking to find himself. In Sordello especially we see him progressing towards tolerance as he exorcizes at last the romantic, impatient, utopian that he was, hypnotized by vast visions. He had also to face the problems of communication, methods and means, form and language,

²²R. Browning, "On The Poet Objective and Subjective; On Shelley As Man and Poet," Papers of The Browning Society, I (1881-1884), 8.

²³J. H. Miller, The Disappearance of God (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 24.

²⁴DeVane, 16.

... and we see him through Sordello working, partially and temporarily perhaps, his cure. ²⁵

While DeVane tends to emphasize the 'by-product' aspect of Sordello and overlook the poem's value in itself, his comments on the poem are, nevertheless, valuable. Browning did learn much from this poem, and after its publication, he could cast off the shackles of Romantic idealism which had haunted his first three poems. With regard to the nature of the heroic figure, Sordello illustrates Browning's transition from a frustrated Romantic idealist, to a conscientious Victorian realist. In this poem, he clearly emphasizes the social conscience of the hero; he must be both a seer and a "Maker-See".

²⁵Ibid.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

With the publication of Sordello in 1840, the early period of Browning's poetic career came to a close. Not until after The Ring and The Book had firmly established his reputation, did the poet return to the style that we see him using in his three earliest poems. As already indicated, while there are flaws in these poems, those who dismiss the early works as insignificant, are overlooking the tremendous development which took place in Browning's thought during this period. The decade between 1830 and 1840 marked the transition from Romantic to Victorian, and, as we have seen throughout this study, Browning's poems Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello trace this transition. The development of the poet's heroic figure also illustrates this progression.

Browning's dissatisfaction with Romanticism is clearly expressed in the early poetry.¹ The Shelleyan idealism of 1830 was replaced by an early Victorian desire for social consciousness; the hero must somehow overcome isolation of the self, and must be concerned with the welfare of all men, not just his own ego.

¹Several scholars have examined Browning's dissatisfaction with Romanticism. The reader may consult any of the following: J. H. Buckley, The Victorian Temper (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1966); D. Colville, Victorian Poetry and the Romantic Religion (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970); P. Drew, "Browning's Rejection of The Romantic Tradition," The Poetry of Robert Browning (London: Methuen Press, 1970), 39ff.; P. Honan, "Review Essays on Robert Browning and Romanticism," Browning Institute Studies, I (1973), 147-172; M. Peckham, Victorian Revolutionaries (New York: Braziller, 1970).

The Romantic hero can no longer fulfill a useful role, and, as we have seen, this is the subject of Browning's early poetry.

Miller comments:

"Pauline", "Paracelsus" and "Sordello" are Browning's versions of a central adventure of romanticism--the attempt to identify oneself with God. ...

When Browning's early heroes try to escape from the "clay prisons" of themselves, and reach divine knowledge, they experience merely the dissipation of their powers into a murky emptiness. The expansiveness of Paracelsus, Sordello, and the protagonist of "Pauline", their attempts to know and be everything at once, leads not to an intensification of life, but rather to just the opposite, a rarefaction, a thinning out, an evaporation of immense energies into the intense inane. The dramatic climax of Browning's three earliest poems is the failure of Romantic Prometheanism.²

Browning saw the failure of the Romantic transcendental hero to overcome his isolation of the self. The poet emphasizes that man progresses collectively rather than individually, thus the person who cannot communicate his infinite gleam of Truth to those less gifted has a meaningless existence. In Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, we have noted how Browning probes the nature of Romantic egoism--an egoism that, in its aspiring for the infinite, disdains the finite, but necessary, conditions of this life. The poet's early heroes are Romantic individuals who fail to cope with their finite existence. Gridley makes this following useful comment on Paracelsus and Sordello:

Browning's most ambitious poems of the 1830s were Paracelsus and Sordello. Both were explorations of the

²J. H. Miller, The Disappearance of God (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 95, 97.

wild dreams and aspirations of exceptional and superior men, both were studies in exasperation.³

The failure of both of these heroes suggests that Browning himself, at this point in his career, had not yet solved the problems which he so earnestly explores in the early poetry. By 1840, Browning had, however, established these three important concepts:

- 1) the importance of the transcendental hero and his infinite vision;
- 2) the necessity of the hero to communicate his infinite vision into a finite reality--the seer had to be a "Maker-See";
- 3) the frustrating difficulty for the hero of transposing that "pure white light" into a finite reality for all men to grasp.

This third aspect, the difficulty of putting the infinite into the finite, was, in 1840, still a stumbling block for Browning, although he realized that the poet held the key to the problem. From observations already noted in previous chapters, we can agree with Raymond, who suggests that this is the central problem in the early poetry:

It is clear that the crux of the struggle in his life as an artist was the difficulty of bodying forth

³R. E. Gridley, Browning (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 13.

the content of his imagination and intellect in adequate poetic forms. ⁴

In 1855, Browning wrote to John Ruskin:

I know that I don't make out my conception by my language,
all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. ⁵

For Browning, the poet stood midway between God and man, and with his dual perspective, the poet's task was to express the infinite in terms of the finite, to show God's will to man. Browning was, of course, familiar with Sartor Resartus, where Carlyle also examines the problem of putting the infinite in the finite. Herr Teufelsdröckh (alias Thomas Carlyle, in this case) decides that Symbols are the solution:

Symbols; revelation of the Infinite in the Finite: Man everywhere encompassed by them; lives and works by them. ...

In the Symbol proper ... there is ... some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, as it were, attainable there. ...

Highest of all Symbols are those wherein the Artist or Poet has risen into Prophet, and all men can recognize a present God and worship the same. ⁶

Because words are symbols which, though finite, can suggest the infinite, Browning emphasizes that it is the Poet who is best

⁴W. O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 10.

⁵Browning's Letter to John Ruskin, Dec. 10, 1855, in The Works of John Ruskin edited by E. T. Cooke and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1909), V. 36, xxxiv.

⁶T. Carlyle, Sartor Resartus (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), 217, 220, 224.

equipped to transpose the infinite into the finite.

Sordello fails as a poet, for he cannot "fit to the finite, his infinity." Because of the dense and obscure style of his early poetry, Browning realizes that he too has failed. Rather than transpose the "pure white light", he now tries to present to the reader, the "prismatic hues" which make up that light. In other words, "with this world as starting point", Browning hopes to present his own glimpse of the infinite to the reader.

The change in Browning's technique did not come immediately but, after fifteen years of experimentation, the poet triumphed in 1855 with Men and Women:

Those two volumes [Men and Women] testify not only to Browning's varied and mature talent; they also mark an important cultural shift. Taken collectively, the poems in those volumes tell us that truth, the 'white light', is conditioned and broken by human individuality; that the best we can do is record versions and perspectives towards reality.⁷

By 1855 Browning had developed his own poetic technique, the dramatic monologue form, as the means by which he could catch the "flash of life"--the essence of both the infinite and the finite.

Browning's experiments in technique which ranged over the fifteen year span between Sordello and Men and Women, illustrate how he develops the dramatic monologue form. While it is not the purpose of this study to examine Browning's poetic growth during this period, having shown, however, how the seeds are

⁷Gridley, 64.

planted in Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello, we can observe their development into the mature Browning style by looking briefly at two poems of this period, Pippa Passes and Saul.

Between 1841 and 1846, Browning published his works in the Bells and Pomegranates series.⁸ There are eight pamphlets in the series: Pippa Passes (1841), King Victor and King Charles (1842), Dramatic Lyrics (1842), A Blot In The 'Scutcheon (1843), Colombe's Birthday (1844), Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845), and Luria and A Soul's Tragedy (1846). In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, whom he had met in 1845, Browning explains the curious title:

The Rabbis make Bells & Pomegranates symbolical of Pleasure and Profit, the Gay & Grave, the Poetry & the Prose, Singing and Sermonizing--such a mixture of effects as in the original hour (that is quarter of an hour) of confidence and creation, I meant the whole should prove at last.⁹

Later, in the Introduction to A Soul's Tragedy, the last number of the series, he explains that the title signifies "an alternation, or mixture of music with discoursing, sound with sense,

⁸The title, Bells and Pomegranates, was suggested to Browning by the Biblical passage Exodus 28: 33-34: "And beneath upon the hem of it thou shalt make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, round about the hem thereof; the bells of gold between them round about: A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe round about."

⁹Robert Browning's Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, October 18, 1845, in The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett 1845-1846, edited by Elvian Kintner (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969).

poetry with thought; which look[ed] too ambitious thus expressed, so the symbol was preferred."¹⁰ Browning did achieve the variety he intended, for the series is composed of six dramas,¹¹ two collections of lyrics, and one dramatic poem.¹² The variety in Bells and Pomegranates suggests the extent of Browning's experimentation in his efforts to find an effective medium of expression.

The character of Pippa and the dramatic nature of Pippa Passes, has caused much controversy among Browning scholars. Some feel that Pippa is naïve and innocent, oblivious of her effect on those around her, and unrealistic, while others suggest that she is not thoughtlessly naïve, but shrewd and intelligent.¹³ Likewise, there is a conflict concerning the genre and whether or

¹⁰R. Browning, Introduction to A Soul's Tragedy.

¹¹Like other Victorian poets, Browning attempted to write stage plays. His first drama, Strafford, in 1837, was followed by those in Bells and Pomegranates. Browning's interest in the drama is a study in itself, and has not been dealt with in this paper. For a study of the plays, the reader may refer to such works as Howard Barnett's dissertation, "Robert Browning and the Drama," (Indiana University, 1959); A. E. Dubois, "Robert Browning Dramatist," Studies in Philology 33 (1936), 626- 655.

¹²Although Browning calls Pippa Passes a "dramatic piece", the poem, like Paracelsus, is not intended for stage production. The nature of Pippa Passes suggests that it is not a play but a dramatic poem.

¹³Roma King (The Focusing Artifice, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968) implies that Pippa is naïve and ignorant, while Margaret Eleanor Glen ["The Meaning and Structure of Pippa Passes," University of Toronto Quarterly, 24 (1954-1955), 410-426] and Dale Kramer ["Character and Theme in Pippa Passes", Victorian Poetry, 2 (1964) 241-249] both suggest that Pippa is intelligent and shrewd.

not Pippa Passes is a drama or a poem.¹⁴ It is not the intention of this brief study to enter onto this scholarly battlefield, but rather, to examine the role of Pippa as an artist/hero, and to evaluate Browning's development from Sordello.

In some ways Pippa is quite similar to Sordello. Both are solitary figures and 'stolen children' and, more important, both are artists. Browning published Pippa Passes only one year after Sordello, and there is no doubt that it is a direct by-product of that poem. As suggested at the conclusion of our study of Sordello, Browning might well have had Pippa in mind when he describes the "peasant child, barefoot and rosy" who sings the unintelligible words of one of Sordello's lyrics (Sordello VI, 853 ff.). DeVane writes that "Pippa begins where Sordello left off."¹⁵ As in his earlier poems, Browning is once more concerned with the role of the artist in society, but whereas Sordello fails as a poet because he cannot communicate, Pippa successfully incites men to action by her song.

Like the twelfth century Italy of Sordello's youth, Pippa's environment of Asolo is corrupt, filled with selfishness, greed, adultery, and jealousy. Gridley shrewdly notes that "God may

¹⁴See J. M. Purcell, "The Dramatic Failure of Pippa Passes," Studies In Philology, 36 (1939), 77-87, and J. M. Arail "Is Pippa Passes A Dramatic Failure?" Studies In Philology, 37 (1940), 120-129.

¹⁵W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), 29.

be in his heaven , but very little is right in the world represented by Asolo."¹⁶ Pippa, however, does not succumb to the evil which surrounds her, and she seems to stand like a lily in the midst of a bramble patch, unaffected by her surroundings. But, while she remains pure and apart from society, Pippa does communicate to the people of Asolo. We already observed that Sordello was painfully self-conscious of his role as a poet, but Pippa is just the opposite, almost completely oblivious of her role as artist. Her song incites "Asolo's Four Happiest Ones" to action. Influenced by her, Sebald and Ottima, Jules, Luigi, and the Monsignor all come to some moral decision and act upon it. While it is questionable whether or not these characters make the right decisions (for example, adding suicide to adultery and murder as in the Sebald and Ottima episode), the important point is that they do act. Both Peckham and Poston ¹⁷ suggest that art cannot give specific instructions for a certain mode of behaviour, and that the onus is on the perceiver to interpret the poem. This idea would be congruent with what Browning has already expressed in Paracelsus: man can misinterpret God's divine evidence. Paracelsus felt that he had been 'chosen' by God and that he could do no wrong. Browning uses this theme again in "Johannes Agricola In Meditation", as the monk in this monologue also feels he has been 'selected' to do God's work.

¹⁶Gridley, 46.

¹⁷M. Peckham, Victorian Revolutionaries, 114 ff. and L. Poston III, "Browning's Political Skepticism, Sordello and the Plays," PMLA 88(March 1973), 260-270.

Pippa, as a poet, is, ironically, a "Maker-See", for she does somehow convey an infinite gleam to a finite and corrupt society. Margaret Eleanor Glen comments:

It is not at all through chance that she sings just the right song at the right moment; it is through God's working out of His will.¹⁸

The actions which result from Pippa's song, Glen also attributes to God's will, and explains their questionable justness by suggesting that it is "simply the irony of God's ways when regarded from man's point of view."¹⁹ While Glen's theory does have some merits, it is not, however, totally satisfactory, for Browning never clearly indicates that these episodes are the result of God's will, and there is a certain degree of irony in the poem as well.

Pippa is apparently successful as a hero/poet. Nevertheless, there are several questions that Browning leaves unanswered in the poem. Although the underlying theme in the poem is the importance of the hero's ability to communicate with others, Browning does not reconcile the tremendous effect of Pippa's song with her complete obliviousness of the evil in her surroundings. Has he then regressed, by creating Pippa as a Romantic idealist? As we have already seen in the earlier poems, Browning expresses his dissatisfaction with Romantic idealism by emphasizing that the

¹⁸Glen, 412.

¹⁹Ibid., 426.

hero must always have one foot firmly anchored within a finite reality. But, Pippa is both unaware of, and unconcerned with, the evil in her surroundings. Collins suggests that, even though Pippa is a reaction against Sordello, the poem is a "regression to the uncomplicated vision of youth" and that Browning has presented a Romantic version of a poet who can do all things for men and yet never become really involved with mankind.²⁰ Pippa then, is almost a pre-Pauline hero.

Collins's view is justifiable in many ways, yet Pippa does progress from Sordello in one important aspect: she is a "Maker-See". Johnson maintains that this is the ultimate role of Browning's artist:

The artist can only achieve a full self-realization through getting into productive communication with the external world.²¹

Despite the fact that Pippa does seem to communicate God's will, the naïve nature of her character suggests that Browning is still experimenting with and exploring different aspects of the hero. It would appear that the poet was faced with deciding whether or not the successful hero/poet can cope with the sins and limitations of a finite society. Pippa, unlike Sordello, does not even attempt to do so. Ultimately, Browning's hero must be both a Pippa and a Sordello.

²⁰T. J. Collins, Robert Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 83 ff.

²¹E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision in Victorian Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 82.

Following the Bells and Pomegranates series, there was an interval of four years during which Browning did not publish any poetry. Significant changes were, however taking place in the young poet. When Browning returned from Italy in 1844, he read Elizabeth Barrett's Poems and, in a passionate letter (January 10, 1845), he declared both his love for [her] verses" and his love for her. Thus began the famous courtship, best recorded in the Letters,²² which ended with a secret marriage in September of 1846, and a hurried flight to Italy. DeVane records that the "life in Italy ... was the golden time of Browning's poetry."²³ Both the Italian atmosphere and the encouragement of his new wife inspired a change in Browning. His poetic technique developed rapidly as his attitude became more positive; the problems which we observed in his earlier poetry all but disappeared. Most noticeable of these developments was an external affirmation in religion. The vegetarian atheist of the Pauline days declared himself a devout Christian thinker. While many scholars²⁴ pounce upon this Christian conversion as the turning point in Browning's career, there is, I believe, some doubt as to the sincerity of Browning's devotion to the Christian faith. The symbol of the Incarnation appealed to Browning not so much as a religious

²²E. Barrett and R. Browning, The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett 1845-1846, ed. by E. Kintner (2 Volumes: Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969).

²³DeVane, 22.

²⁴For example, H. Martin, The Faith Of Robert Browning (Naperville, Ill.: SCM Book Club, 1953).

symbol but as an aesthetic one. With this image of the Incarnation, he could successfully symbolize the nature of the poetic process, as he thought it to be. Whatever the motives, however, certainly an undeniable tone of affirmation entered his poetry at this time. The publication of Christmas Eve and Easter Day in 1850, marks this positive shift in Browning's thought.

Browning was particularly attracted to one aspect of Christianity--the Incarnation. This event symbolized for him, not only the essential miracle of Christianity but, more important, the hero's role. The problems of the Pauline protagonist, of Paracelsus, and of Sordello were all characterized by this one symbol which miraculously encompassed both the infinite and the finite. "The Incarnation provided an adequate explanation for what to Browning was the mystery of life."²⁵ In an unpublished thesis, Beryl Stone comments on the importance of the Incarnation to Browning:

The symbolic act of the Incarnation of Christ offered Browning an analogy of his own experience as a creative artist. The artist enjoys a vision of truth which must be shared with humanity. As God clothed himself in human flesh, so the poet speaks in words the vision that he has seen. If the artist manages to convey in language the truth of his vision, he will have unfolded something of the Divine Word in human words. He will share in the redeeming work of Christ as he liberates men from the tyranny of error and the bondage of self. ²⁶

²⁵W. Whitla, The Central Truth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 3.

²⁶B. Stone, "Browning and Incarnation," (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1957), iii, quoted from Whitla, 5.

Browning uses the Incarnation not only as the "central truth" in his religious thought, but also as the crux of his poetic aesthetic. Just as Christ was both God and man, infinite and finite, so was the poet/hero capable of encompassing in his poem the "pure white light" of an infinite and eternal truth, and the "prismatic" hues of a finite and temporal reality! In his book, The Central Truth, Whitla makes the following statements:

By exploring the aesthetic process as it is related to Christian thought, the poet may come to terms with himself, others, the world, and God, as Browning has done. The Incarnation, then, can be seen as a central unifying concept in Browning; ... It is by analogy with this act of God that the poet may attempt to create--to give flesh to his words as God did to the Word. For Browning this became a tremendous problem of communication--the putting of his thoughts into words. 27

Browning's early heroes had failed because they were not "Makers-See"; they could not "fit to the finite, [their] infinity." After this affirmation of the Incarnation, Browning's heroes must be Christ-figures in order to be completely successful. To accommodate this impossibility, Browning reiterates the importance of aspiration. Although man cannot be Christ, he can aspire to be as Christ-like as possible. A few gifted individuals with heroic potential, will catch glimpses of an absolute perfection.

The one poem which best exemplifies the culmination of all these ideas is Saul. The first nine sections of the poem were completed in 1845 and published as a fragment in Dramatic Romances. Browning was dissatisfied with the poem, for it offered

²⁷Whitla, 10,11.

no conclusions but was, as DeVane records, "a mere catalogue ... of the good things of the earth... the things that Saul should have praised heaven for."²⁸ Browning lacked the conviction to complete Saul until further development in his spiritual and poetical thought. This development took place after his marriage and move to Italy, and is illustrated in Christmas Eve and Easter Day. Saul was completed and republished in Men and Women in 1855.

The symbol of the Incarnation offered to Browning the means by which the poem could be satisfactorily concluded, and in Saul, the poet fuses his religious and poetic aesthetic. David both envisions the Incarnation and communicates it to Saul; he is a seer and a "Maker-See":

The truth came upon me. No harp more--no song more--!
outbroke--

.....

O Saul it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by forever: a Hand like this
hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the
Christ stand!

(237, 309-312.)

In her article, "Browning's Saul",²⁹ A. W. Crawford traces David's four attempts to rouse the lethargic Saul. Up until lyric ix, the

²⁸ DeVane, 256.

²⁹ A. W. Crawford, "Browning's Saul," Queen's Quarterly, IV (1926-1927), 448-454.

first two attempts are human. David plays songs for Saul which tell of the unity of all God's creatures in this world, and of "how good is man's life." These are only worldly gifts however, and cannot nourish Saul's troubled soul. At this point in the poem, Browning reaches an impasse, for he can only affirm the good things in this world, and it was not until after he could affirm a spiritual reality that the poem could be concluded. In the last half of the poem, then, added in 1855, David becomes a visionary poet and ascends to a spiritual realm. His third attempt to restore the King is spiritual, and his final song communicates the love of God to the now aroused Saul. Love plays an intricate part in Browning's poetical thought, for it is through love that the transcendental hero can avoid isolation of the self:

To see without love, to see by knowing, is to deform
and break. ... we have to see and to care at the same
time.³⁰

It is through David's love for Saul that he can transcend the finite to the infinite, because God is Love.

David, like Sordello, is capable of an infinite transcendental vision and, like Pippa, can communicate this infinite truth to make others see. Unlike Sordello, he is not numbed into inaction, and, unlike Pippa, David is not oblivious either of his role as poet or of the sinful and finite conditions of this life. Gridley comments:

³⁰ H. Bloom, The Ringers In The Tower (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 167.

It is only through David's enraptured mystical song that God's truth can be apprehended. David is a successful Poet-as-Hero in a way that Sordello, for example, had not been. ... the imperfections of this world implied God's perfection, but divine perfection was unknowable to man except in moments of mystical rapture or intuitive apprehension; further, such apprehensions are imfable and cannot be translated to others through the distorting media of reason and human speech. However, 'song' ... can lead the artist to such perception and can at the same time approximate it for others. ³¹

With the figure of David, Browning triumphs over his earlier problems with the transcendental hero. David is capable of an infinite gleam, yet he does not isolate the self through a pursuit of the infinite; rather, it is through his love for Saul that he transcends the finite to the spiritual level of experience. As we have already noted, the ability to do this is the function of the transcendental hero. By embracing the finite (that is, love for mortal man), Browning's hero attains the infinite. David can be seen as Browning's successful poet/hero.

In his own attempts to reconcile the infinite and the finite, Browning uses a light metaphor. The "white light" signifies the infinite gleam of God's Truth, while "prismatic hues" are the various perspectives of a finite reality. In Christmas Eve, he develops this metaphor into a beautiful rainbow image:

'Twas a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect,
From heaven to heaven extending, perfect
As the mother-moon's self, full in face.
It rose, distinctly at the base
 With its seven proper colours chorded,
Which still, in the rising, were compressed,
Until at last they coalesced,

³¹Gridley, 76.

And supreme the spectral creatures lorded
In a triumph of whitest white.

(385-394.)

Later, in the same poem, he realizes that "God's own hand did the rainbow weave"(1204), and this realization symbolizes the change which occurs in Browning's poetic technique. In the earlier poems, we have seen how his heroes attempt to 'jump over the rainbow' in their efforts to grasp the "white light" of infinity, just as Browning himself does. But the hero fails because he rejects the finite. However, with the realization that each hue of the rainbow makes up the "white light", Browning's hero can now pursue the infinite through the finite.

In 1845, Browning wrote to Elizabeth Barrett of his dissatisfaction with his poetry:

You speak out,--I only make men & women speak--give
you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure
white light, even if it is in me.³²

By 1855, Browning was no longer frustrated with the "prismatic hues" of his poetry but, rather, utilized his talent for portraying "action in character" in one of his finest collections, Men and Women. This collection of dramatic monologues in turn paved the way for his greatest poetic achievement, The Ring and The Book, in 1868. Here, the "prismatic hues" are ingeniously fused into the "white light", as both infinite and finite coalesce:

³²Browning's letter to Elizabeth Barrett, Jan. 13, 1845, in Letters ed. by Kintner.

Rather learn and love
Each facet-flash of the revolving year!--
Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,
The variance now, the eventual unity,
Which makes the miracle.

(R&B, I, 1360-1364.)

These two images in Browning's poetry, the Incarnation and the light metaphor, aptly illustrate his poetic development and his concept of the nature of the heroic figure. Through the Incarnation, by which the spirit is made flesh, the "pure white light" is intensely focused within one aspect or hue of the finite. Miller sums up this connection between the infinite and the finite, and the Incarnation:

Browning cannot, in isolation, find the tiny point at the centre of his own soul where he coincides with God. ... His task as poet is to reach and express the infinite enclosed in the finite. ...

Ultimately the doctrine of the Incarnation in Browning is the idea that each imperfect and limited man through whom the power of God swirls is a temporary incarnation of God, one of the infinitely varied ways in which God makes himself real in the world. ³³

In the middle period of his poetic career, Browning achieves a successful balance between the hero as mystic and the hero as a man of action, and the resulting tension creates a "Maker-See", as is illustrated by the figure of David. Dowden calls Browning's attitude one of "militant transcendentalism", ³⁴ and this term

³³ Miller, 117, 155.

³⁴ E. Dowden, Studies In Literature 1789-1877 (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench & Co., 1883), 82.

suggests the aggressive nature of the poet in his attempts to enclose the infinite within the finite, and to overcome isolation of the self. Again Miller's analysis can serve as a useful summary:

There is always a gap between the creation and God. ... In that gap stands the poet. ... The poet faces two directions, upward toward the transcendent God and down-ward toward man as incarnated in the creation.³⁵

The poet/hero, with his dual perspective, can successfully convey infinite truth to a finite reality.

Throughout his early poetic career, Browning's heroic figure develops in various aspects. As we observed in our study of Pauline and Paracelsus, although he firmly rejects Romantic Prometheanism, the poet flounders for almost twenty years before he can satisfactorily put forth his own mature concept of the hero: the man who transcends human experience but avoids isolation of the self through love for others, glimpses an infinite truth, and then conveys this vision to a finite reality in order that others, less gifted, may be inspired to a higher level of moral action. Thus man progresses towards God.

The artist, more gifted than others, can perceive not only the temporal but the eternal, and how the finite moment fits into the completed plan:

God has conceded two sights to a man--
One, of men's whole work, time's completed plan,

³⁵Miller, 112.

The other, of the minute's work, man's first
Step to the plan's completeness:

.....

You were God: be man now! Let those glances fall!

(Sordello, V, 85-88, 97.)

Sordello fails because he cannot "let those glances fall." His pride will not permit him to stoop to the finite conditions of this life, and he lacks a medium through which to convey his glimpse of the infinite. According to Browning, however, the successful hero must be able to guide others and, to achieve this end, he must be an artist. Through his love for others, he can avoid isolation of the self. In order to express the poet's role, Browning uses the symbol of the Incarnation as the means by which the infinite can be made finite, the "prismatic hues" fused into the "pure white light". The hero/poet can perceive the "moment, one and infinite" (By The Fireside, 186), and can convey this perception to guide others: "the best/ Impart the gift of seeing to the rest" (Sordello, III, 867-868).

Thus we have seen through our study of the early poetry, how Browning evolves the nature of the heroic figure. The Romantic Promethean hero is rejected in Pauline and Paracelsus, and, in Sordello, the poet is able to affirm that the true hero, in order to avoid isolation of the self and have a meaningful existence, must be a "Maker-See".

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