A Study Of Robert Browning's "sordello"

Stefanie Anne Ketley

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LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE NOUS L'AVONS RECUE
A STUDY OF ROBERT BROWNING'S SORDELLO

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Readers of Sordello have insufficiently appraised Browning's use of a late-medieval, early-Renaissance setting to express his nineteenth-century themes. They tend either to dismiss the poem's historical details in favour of its nineteenth-century implications, or to exaggerate Browning's interest in the Italian Renaissance at the expense of his nineteenth-century concerns. The thesis argues that although Browning is reasonably accurate about historical details, a greater concern is to illustrate the continuities between historical periods determined by universal human inclinations and experiences, and by the continuities of God's providential ways.

Other Victorians' historical writings tended either to idealize or repudiate the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, and to question the potential of the nineteenth century. The thesis argues that Browning in Sordello, with its late-medieval, early-Renaissance setting, persuades readers to temper these idealizations and repudiations by affirming the progressive efforts of men throughout history to respond to the "Eden tale" of human experience.

In addition to the discussion of Sordello's setting in Chapter One, the thesis tries to resolve critical problems with distinctions to be made among Browning, Sordello, and the narrator. It is argued that both the thirteenth-century Sordello and the nineteenth-century narrator are represented as developing, fallible poets who
illustrate responses to human experience and poetry Browning sees as characteristic of the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sordello represents some thirteenth- and nineteenth-century extremes of Neoplatonic idealism and libertinism; the narrator is a Christian-humanist poet whose attitudes towards the end of the poem approximate those of Browning.

These arguments are developed in chapters analyzing the poem's three main themes: Chapter Two discusses Browning's affirmation of secular love which is based on temporal service rather than on other worldly ideals; in Chapter Three, Browning's awareness of and response to religious problems in the 1830's is examined; Chapter Four explains the discriminations made in Sordello between a mystical, prophetic poetry characteristic of some Italian Renaissance and nineteenth-century poetry, and the dramatic poetry characteristic of the English Renaissance which Browning affirms and develops.
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Browning's *Sordello* is one of the finest masks ever presented.

Ezra Pound,

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning's Sordello is a semi-dramatic poem with an historical setting which is primarily about its nineteenth-century narrator's developing response to poetry and to the poem he is in process of writing. The narrator writes about the thirteenth-century minor troubador Sordello, who lived during the Italian Guelf-Ghibellin civil wars which provide the historical background of Browning's poem. Sordello, published in 1840, was composed over a seven-year period; in 1835 Browning wrote to W. J. Fox that it was "rather of a more popular nature" than his earlier poems Pauline and Paracelsus. The belief that the poem was of a "popular nature" was shattered by its reception: since 1840 Sordello has been undeservedly labelled as the most incomprehensible, confused, and disjointed poem in the English language. Critics have complained mainly about Sordello's disruptive narrative, its obscure historical details and allusions, its unusually complicated verse and metrical structures, and its focus on a minor thirteenth-century troubador. Exceptions to this condemnation have been few, most notably Dante Gabriel Rossetti's and, as the epigraph to this thesis indicates, Ezra Pound's: Rossetti read the poem to his Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and Pound admired the development of the poem's narrative.²

More recent studies have appraised and affirmed the poem's experimental aspects, and its reflections of Browning's ideas about.
poetry. One of the foremost proponents of the poem is Thomas J. Collins, who argues convincingly that the synthetist poetry evolved by Browning in *Sordello* informs much of Browning's poetry until 1889. Readers of the poem are also indebted to Herbert P. Tucker, who has contributed a valuable study of *Sordello* argued from the post-structuralist point of view that Browning is resisting ideas of closure. It is the intention of this thesis to contribute further to these contemporary and affirmative studies of *Sordello* by analyzing its eclectic yet unified themes and images in relation to one another, to subsequent poems, and to the poem's historical concerns; in addition, the study aims to clarify distinctions to be made between the personal and poetic developments of the narrator and Sordello.

The study begins with a discussion of the poem's late-medieval, early-Renaissance Italian setting. It is argued that the setting is developed as a "type Of Life" (III. 721-724) which, although it is congruent with the particularities of the Guelf-Ghibellin conflict, is intended to illuminate Browning's sense of the similarities between the experiences of thirteenth- and nineteenth-century men and women. Within the context of Browning's sense of the universality of human experience, however, and related to his awareness of particularities, is a sense that the Italian Renaissance is in some ways different from the English Renaissance, a difference which is reflected in the poetry of both countries. We see this in *Sordello* through the contrasts drawn between the Italianate Sordello, who wholeheartedly espouses Renaissance Neoplatonism, and the English Christian-humanist narrator, whose poetic affinities lie with those of poets such as Sir Philip Sidney who are skeptical of Neoplatonic extremes. Other Victorians
idealized the Italian Renaissance, and by implication the aesthetic principles of men such as Sordello; Browning is suggesting in Sordello that readers also consider the merits of English Renaissance principles and poetry which were different from those in Italy.

It is argued in the thesis that Browning's use in Sordello of a late-medieval, early-Renaissance setting is partly elicited by the literary and intellectual milieu of the nineteenth century when contemporary writers were evaluating the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and comparing them with the nineteenth century; Browning shared this concern with history. Unlike them, however, he does not use medieval or Renaissance settings and conventions to idealize or repudiate particular periods of history; instead, he emphasizes the continuities of human experience and God's providential ways. In Sordello he questions the tendency to idealize or repudiate the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, and indicates that those who do so underestimate the contributions of English Renaissance poets in whose traditions the narrator places himself.

The thesis proposes that the narrator, more than the Italianate Sordello, represents the poem's norms, and that towards the conclusion of the poem he reflects a number of Browning's attitudes. He is, however, a developing character whose views of history, Sordello, secular love, religion, and poetry are tempered by the process of creating his poem; his developing perceptions underline the poem's dynamic structural and thematic unities, and anticipate the poetic, religious, and ethical principles, as well as the dramatic poetic techniques, which are characteristic of Browning's mature poetry.
of drama in character, and in particular his provision of a dramatic voice which only partly understands the implications of the processes being described in the poem, is also characteristic of the English Renaissance and Elizabethan poems and plays he so much admired; several studies have established correspondences between the techniques and themes of the dramatic poems of Browning and Donne, and similar narrative voices are found in Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* and *Astrophel and Stella*. Browning's characterization of his narrator, then, indicates yet another affirmation and imitation of English Renaissance and Christian-humanist poetic techniques and principles, a subject which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four in terms of Browning's allusions in *Sordello* to Sidney. Readers of Browning's *Sordello*, however, tend on the one hand to believe the narrator is omniscient, and that he speaks for Browning; others resent the narrator's fallibility and assume that Browning has failed to provide within his poem normative or admirable responses to human experience. Such readers have difficulty interpreting the contrasts between the narrator's early bravado and claims to "unexampled themes" that alternate with his self-doubt--"If I should falter now . . . (I. 353). They also have trouble explaining the narrator's uncertainty about some issues. Michael Yetman assumes that after Book I Browning "makes little effort to sustain the fiction of a distinction between himself and his narrator." Michael Mason, too, refers to the speaker and Browning interchangeably, yet notes that "Browning has some firm but rather vague notions" about the differences between internals and externals in poetry. Robert Columbus and Claudette Kemper are alert to the narrator's fallibility, but do not recognize his developing
Notes


2 See Mary Ellis Gibson, "Browning and Pound: 'Pourquoi nier son père?"' Browning Society Notes, 10, No. 2 (1980), 1-10, for a summary of Pound’s comments on Sordello, and for a discussion of similarities between Pound and Browning regarding poetic techniques and the use of history in poetry.


5 Robert Browning, Sordello (London: Edward Moxon, 1840).
CHAPTER ONE

Sordello: Setting, Context and Themes

[Sordello was] obliged to ask himself, "What was,"
A speedy answer followed, but, alas,
One of God's large one's, tardy to condense
Itself into a period: answers whence
A tangle of conclusions must be stripp'd,
At any risk, trim to pattern clipp'd.

(Sordello, II. 721-726)

I

Readers of Browning's Sordello have characteristically dismissed
or underestimated the details of the poem's thirteenth-century Italian
setting, a response which is in some ways incongruent with the atti-
tudes of those who admire the acuity of subsequent historical poems,
especially those set in the Renaissance. Ironically, it was Browning
himself who gave credence to the belief that Sordello's historical
setting was in itself meaningless: in the poem's 1863 dedicatory
preface to John Milson he noted that the "historical decoration was
purposely of no more importance than a background requires: and my
stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little
else is worth study" (p. 150). Several readers have accepted Brown-
ing's statement at face value, thereby dismissing any attempt on
Browning's part to use the thirteenth-century setting and conventions
to underline continuities between thirteenth-century and nineteenth-
century experiences, or to evaluate and imitate nineteenth-century
revivals of interest in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Michael G. Yetman, for example, argues that "Browning was right to insist that the 'historical decoration' of Sordello, the story of Guelf and Ghibellin political intrigue in thirteenth-century Italy, was 'of no more importance than a background requires.'"\(^2\) It should be noted, however, that Browning's phrase includes mention of the "incidents in the development of a soul (emphasis added)," and that a central theme of the poem is Sordello's inability to function creatively in isolation from the world in which he lives. One should also take into account Browning's highly sophisticated sense of irony when considering the implications of his comment that the poem's "historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires": in Browning's poetry the "background" is richly and selectively detailed to enhance the themes of the poems, and is therefore of considerable "importance."

Yetman proceeds, however, to argue that the historical setting is in itself extraneous, and that it functions only as a distancing device which allowed Browning to deal with personal conflicts: Browning's choice "of an obscure thirteenth-century failed Italian poet--is relevant to an understanding of his own struggle for identity. The obscurity of the historical persona allows Browning the freedom to make his Sordello over into whatever image he might choose."\(^3\) While it is agreed that Sordello's historical obscurity gave Browning poetic license, readers' appreciation of Sordello and Browning's poetic abilities in the 1830's will increase when we recognize his use of thirteenth-century historical allusions and literary conventions to underline the historical continuities between that time and his own,
and to contribute to the nineteenth-century fascination with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

There are critics who develop an alternative line of thought to Yetman's in which they argue that Browning is interested in details of thirteenth-century history which help to explain the subsequent breakdown of the Renaissance from which history had not yet recovered. Stewart Walker Holmes, in his attempt to explain the choice of historical setting, thinks Browning was drawn to the siege of Ferrara in 1224 because it initiated "the powerful and bloody reign of the most infamous tyrant that Italy, and perhaps, say the historians, the world has ever suffered." This event, says Holmes, "presented either Sordello, the humanitarian, or Ecelino, the tyrant, with the opportunity of starting a new order of things, of wielding significant power in medieval Italy." Alan P. Johnson develops a similar, more refined argument: "Browning developed his own version of the historical 'myth' of classical revival... The poem distinguishes between two types of revival, one symbolized by Apollo and the other symbolized by Bacchus and championed unconsciously by Taurello Salinguerra. Sordello champions the Apollonian, first as poet and then as poet-politician, and fails. The Bacchic revival follows with its mixture of cultivation and despotism." Johnson, like Holmes, suggests that Browning is blaming Sordello for the breakdown of the Renaissance: "Had he succeeded he would have ushered in an age not only of republican liberty but also of sensuous cultivation." Finally, Johnson argues that "Browning's characterization of the new age and its despots suggests Ruskin's later, damming description of the 'Renaissance.'" This equation of Browning's view with Ruskin's is a
misconception which originated with Ruskin himself in his comments on Browning's representation of the Italian Renaissance in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church." Clearly, Holmes, Johnson, and Ruskin think Browning is only maligning the Renaissance, and Holmes and Johnson believe that Sordello is subsequently a pessimistic representation of human failure rather than an attempt to place human imperfection in a God-created, dynamic and positive perspective. Their arguments need to be integrated with an awareness of Sordello's nineteenth-century implications, and with Browning's sense, expressed as early as Sordello, of the continuities of historical processes and conventions which link these centuries.

A sense of this historical frame and perspective is crucial to our understanding of what the young Browning was doing with Sordello, which is fundamentally about a nineteenth-century poet's quest for poetic materials and techniques suited to what he believed to be the needs of his readers, a quest which involved a response to history as well as to the history of poetry. That his poem has an historical setting which reflects his exploration of and response to the implications of historical experience invites readers to consider what he achieved through his setting; a consideration such as this will help readers to understand more fully the "incidents in the development of a soul" experienced by Sordello and the poem's narrator, the thirteenth-century and nineteenth-century poets whose respective and contrasted developments underline the concerns of Browning, and of this thesis. The setting, then, is important, but should always be viewed in relation to Browning's response to the nineteenth century.
For this reason, Browning's use of thirteenth-century historical and poetic conventions is not motivated by a desire to accumulate facts about the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, however intriguing they may be; nor is he interested in simply describing what he imagined to be the customs or manners of past eras. He is more interested in what history reveals about human nature and the ways of God, and although the fictions of his historical poems show a degree of historical accuracy, and an attempt to be faithful to the particulars of recounted events, he takes many liberties with historical facts, and blends them with imaginative details which elaborate his poems' themes. Browning's historical poems, including Sordello, reflect the concerns of a Christian-humanist poet interested in the totality of human efforts, as William O. Raymond observes.

The men and women of his poems are representative of their eras and reflect the milieu--political, artistic, and religious--of the times in which they live. His interest in all the works of man is unflagging, and the fecundity of his humanism is finely illustrated by his panoramic vistas of these on the stage of history. His characters are not conceived in abstraction from their environments, but are motivated by the currents of active life and thought of their epochs, which range from ancient Israel and Athens to contemporary Italy and England.

It should be noted that the quality and nature of Browning's humanism go well beyond the narrow image of Renaissance scholars like those he views ironically in "A Grammarian's Funeral," who "decided not to Live but Know . . ." (1. 139), and who separated knowledge and culture from temporal human experiences. Browning's humanism, too, involves an active seeking out of human knowledge and efforts throughout history, but is always related to present human efforts to understand the
physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence, and always aims
to place the world and time in a dynamic, reciprocal, and progressive
relationship with what is divine and infinite.

Browning's medieval and Renaissance poems involve an energizing
of facts and conventions as he dramatizes combinations of fictional
and historical characters engaged in the drama of historical experi-
ences. Browning was never a poet inclined merely to reproduce
historical conventions or facts. He states in a letter that "poetry,
if it is to deserve the name, ought to create—or re-animate something—
not merely reproduce raw fact taken from somebody else's book."\(^\text{11}\)

Similarly, he is skeptical of the affected medievalism of the
Pre-Raphaelites: "you know I hate the effeminacy of his [Rosetti's]
school,—the men that dress up like women,—that use obsolete forms,
too, and archaic accentuations. . . . It is different when the object
is to imitate. . . .\(^\text{12}\) Browning's use of historical conventions and
settings, then, involves imitation and creation rather than mere
reproduction, a thoughtful, observant, critical evaluation of the use
of "obsolete forms" and "archaic accentuations." Browning's use in
Sordello of a thirteenth-century Italian setting to comment on
nineteenth-century experiences and historicism is an important aspect
of his creative imitation.\(^\text{13}\)

The Browning canon illustrates a life-long interest in Italian
history and culture: most of his Renaissance poems are set in Italy,
the country which supposedly experienced most fully the flowering of
the Renaissance. Browning's knowledge of the art, poetry, history and
politics of Italy was the product of several years spent studying with
an Italian tutor with classes conducted in Italian, and years spent
travelling and living in Italy. Browning's letters to Elizabeth during their courtship contain profuse references to Italian paintings, historians, sculpture, and poets, for example to "Titian's Daughter," Vasari, Castiglione, and Dante; the letters also allude frequently to the major figures of the English Renaissance such as Spenser, Sidney, Donne, Bacon, Crashaw and Milton.

Browning is generally believed by critics to admire greatly Italian art, an admiration which is used to explain his frequent use of Italian Renaissance settings. William O. Raymond argues, for example, that Browning's "favourite historical background is the Renaissance, an age of humanistic individualism, in contrast with the otherworldliness and social conformity of the Middle Ages." Similarly, Roger Sharrock says of Browning's Renaissance poems that "the majority depict the Renaissance seen as an age of human transformation and enrichment, or, as we have seen, that moment of the early Renaissance when the new ideas were posed on the cusp of the dying middle age." These statements are quoted in full because they so perfectly illustrate the conventional images of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance shared by nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics, yet not by Robert Browning; one needs to compare and contrast these views of the Italian Renaissance with those of Browning. He refers in 1845 to what is "an old belief of his—that Italy is stuff for the use of the North, and no more: Poetry there is none, nearly as possible none, in Dante even--." This "old belief" is restated in a letter written in 1866:

I agree with you, & always did, as to the uninterestingness of the Italian individually, as thinking, originating souls: I never read a line in a modern Italian book that was of
use to me,—never saw a flash of poetry come out of an Italian word: in art, in action, yes,—not in the region of ideas: I always said, they are poetry, don’t and can’t make poetry; & you know what I mean by that,—nothing relating to rhymes and melody and lo stile: but as a nation, politically, they are most interesting to me...

It is clear from the preceding statements that readers of Browning need to reconsider his reasons for setting so many of his major poems in Italian history. Browning’s statements imply a sense of differences between the poetry of Italy and the North: although it is the Italians who "are" poetry, it is the Northerners who "make" poetry. Browning’s phrasing suggests significant aspects of his theory of poetry and response to Italian and British poetic traditions which are examined fully in Chapter Four of this thesis.

A sense of differences between responses to the Renaissance found in Italy and in the north has been noted by the historian Denys Hay in The Italian Renaissance: Hay observes that Italian Renaissance values, for example, cultural, political, and moral, were "not immediately acceptable in the North."20 Northern poets, in particular, responded differently to poetry than did the Italians: as Arthur E. Barker argues,

the North was of course well aware of the sophistication of Renaissance Italy, but it regarded its sophistication and its seductive Neoplatonism with hard-headed detachment, and its humanistic and poetically satiric characterizations of Italianate English, Macaronis, and seductively self-deceiving Astrosilphs depend on a thoroughly northern tradition.21

It is an argument of the thesis that Browning, too, was aware of differences between Italian and northern poetry, and that Sordello
reflects these differences partly through its detached response to Neoplatonism and its satire of the Italianate Sordello.

Browning typically does not provide his readers with explicit descriptions of the ideas which separate the Italians from the Northerners; we are induced to infer these from the poems themselves, and to make discriminations based on our interpretations of recurring themes and subjects. A predominant theme in Browning's Renaissance poems is the drawing power of Neoplatonic idealism as it affects secular love, religious thought and aesthetic theories. Aprile in Paracelsus "would Love infinitely, and be loved!" (II. 385); Paracelsus seeks "the secret of the world" (I. 276); Pompilia in The Ring and the Book longs for death because in "heaven we have the real and true and sure" (VII. 1826); Andrea del Sarto's pictures are "Placid and perfect" (1. 99), and Sordello wants poetry to rise above the realm of language:

Leave the mete rude
Explicit details! 't is but brother's speech
We need, speech where an accent's change gives each
The other's soul--no speech to understand
By former audience.

(V. 618-621)

It is significant that in most of these poems characterizing Neoplatonic idealists there are also contrapuntal characters content with "the C Major of this life" ("Abt Vogler," 1. 96) who try to orchestrate life's sometimes discordant sounds, and to persuade the idealists to do the same.

In Paracelsus, for example, the secular love of Festus and Michal offsets Aprile's more abstract and less satisfying desire to "Love infinitely," and Festus repeatedly tries to convince Paracelsus that human imperfection is designed by a loving God to encourage the
development of human potential. The aged, weary, and near-despairing
Pope continues to wrestle with human problems and to make God-like
decisions despite his sense of human frailty, and the narrator of
Sordello offsets Sordello's desire for perfect poetry and history with
the argument that human imperfections and time give men throughout
history the opportunity to fulfill their potential and to contribute
to God's plans. The contrapuntal characters such as the narrator of
Sordello are also attracted to Neoplatonic ideals, but have in their
own ways modified them to suit the realities of human nature, time,
and God's challenging, providential ways.

Browning's use of Neoplatonic ideas and images in his poems
has been well-documented by, in particular, Elizabeth Bieman and Jack
Matthews, and, as these critics imply, is more general and in
essence than it is doctrinal and codified. The challenge becomes not
just the observation of Neoplatonic ideology in Browning's poetry but
the exploration of his discriminations between a variety of Neo-
platonic ideas as they affect human experience. Browning seems to
have struggled constantly with his own idealism, with the intensely
human desire for less strife and more perfection in both life and
poetry. His poems abound with characters who, like Sordello and
Andrea del Sarto, seek perfected experiences and art forms and are
forever frustrated by the lack of them. Browning's idealism is
especially evident in his characterization of women: Pauline, the
last Duchess, Pippa, Pompilia, and the Lyric Love Elizabeth are
testaments to Browning's veneration of innocent and idealized femi-
ninity, his search for a perfect muse. Yet there is also a substance
in Browning that resists certain forms of idealism, especially those
in which unearthly ideals and aspirations can never be accommodated to the realities of life. Sordello vacillates between transcendental and libertine experiences, demonstrating an irresoluteness the poem's narrator and Browning find to be questionable. Browning is even more disdainful of the false idealism of aesthetes such as the Duke, the Bishop, or Sordello's Salinger: their aesthetic appreciation of perfect art and beauty cloaks a libertinism Browning finds repugnant.

He is, however, sympathetic to well-intended quests for perfection: again and again, he dramatizes characters such as Abt Vogler who seek and experience transcendental moments during which "Earth had attained to heaven" (1. 32), and yet who reluctantly affirm the transience of such moments:

Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:
I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.
Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again.
(11. 89-91)

Browning is, then, sympathetic towards Neoplatonic ideals which encourage a temperate, ethical and creative life, and skeptical of those which make it impossible for people to cope with or enjoy the realities of earthly life he believes should be viewed in relation to one's potential divinity. He comes to believe that men and women are born into a God-supported world of dynamical imperfection, that human imperfection is a gift of opportunity rather than tribulation only, that salvation lies in attempts to refine one's imperfect, embodied soul, and that the quest for static perfection can be limiting and frustrating. Sordello's quest for perfection is shown to be misguided in its denial of the potential of secular love, the world and time, themes that receive a detailed discussion in later chapters.
Sordello's idealism is most evident in his responses towards history, and his belief that the processes of history should be perfected immediately. His aim is "to build up Rome again" (IV: 1014), an aim which indicates his repudiation of the present and his idealization of a classical past. These aims reflect a belief that historical processes are discontinuous and reflect human decline. It is an argument of this thesis that Browning sought in Sordello and subsequent historical poems to offset notions such as these and to represent in his poems what he perceived to be continuities in human nature and God's ways which nonetheless allowed for human progress, through time, towards an undisclosed yet believed-in divine plan.

The following survey of representative nineteenth-century responses in literature and prose to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is intended to illustrate some attitudes towards these periods of history which were prevalent before, during, and after the time Browning wrote Sordello. Readers who would question the inclusion in this thesis of attitudes towards these periods written after the publication of Sordello are in some ways justified. Part of the argument of this thesis, however, is that Browning in Sordello anticipates many of the concerns of his later Renaissance poems in which he continues to respond to contemporary attitudes towards periods of history. This thesis includes, therefore, references to the ideas of Arnold, Pater, Burckhardt and Symonds, representative writers who articulate clearly and in detail notions which were part of the intellectual milieu during the 1830's. It is also an aim of this thesis to show that Browning's views were different from those of most
Victorians, an argument which further justifies the following discussion of contrasting views.

II

Born just now--
With the new century--beside the glow
And efflorescence out of barbarism. . . .
(I. 577-579)

Sordello's quest for a past which is more ideal than the present is a common quest in Victorian literature and prose, as in Carlyle's Past and Present, Ruskin's The Stones of Venice, Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, and Pater's The Renaissance. Browning, like his contemporaries, turns to the Middle Ages and to the Renaissance in his attempts to achieve a fuller understanding of the nineteenth century. His images of these periods, and his sense of their cultural, experiential, and historical relations with each other, and with the nineteenth century, are, however, different from those of many of his contemporaries. Other Victorians tend to idealize either the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, overlooking the historical continuities Browning sees between them which subsequently link them to the nineteenth century; along with the particularities of their historical circumstances, he sees these periods as in some ways complementary to one another in terms of shared and universal human inclinations and experiences, and in terms of the continuities of God's providential ways.

This section of the thesis focuses on Browning's use in Sordello of a thirteenth-century setting which allows him to draw on medieval
and Renaissance conventions and experiences; it is an argument of the thesis that part of Browning's purpose in *Sordello*, and in subsequent historical poems, is to imitate the historicism of his contemporaries. The discussion of Browning's response to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is followed by a survey of some representative nineteenth-century attitudes towards the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This survey will underline the intellectual climate within which Browning wrote *Sordello*, and subsequent historical poems, and will show significant differences between the responses of Browning and his contemporaries to the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, and to the nineteenth century. It should be pointed out, however, that although Browning's response to both the Middle Ages and to the Renaissance is taken into account in the thesis, more emphasis is placed on *Sordello*'s Renaissance qualities. Browning's anticipation in *Sordello* of themes, characters, and techniques in his critically acclaimed Renaissance poems, for example "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" and *The Ring and the Book*, is discussed at appropriate points. It is believed that Browning's response to the period is a developing one, and that the perceptions reflected in *Sordello* increase during his sustained response to the historicism of his contemporaries.

In a letter to Elizabeth written in 1846 Browning notes the popular attitude towards historical periods, and implies the difference between himself and his contemporaries:

The cant is, that an 'age of transition' is the melancholy thing to contemplate and delineate—whereas the worst things of all to look back on are times of comparative standing still, rounded in their impotent completeness.
Unlike many of his contemporaries, Browning is interested in transition, process, and growth, rather than "impotent completeness."

Browning's setting in Sordello, then, provides him with a complex focus: it enables him to explore medieval and Renaissance conventions, to discern the continuities which link them to each other and to the nineteenth century, and to reflect and evaluate nineteenth-century revivals of interest in the Middle Ages, and, in particular, in the Renaissance.

Browning sees in the nineteenth century a recurrence of various Renaissance tensions between, for example, Christianity and paganism, Neoplatonism and libertinism, faith and rationalism, prophetic and mimetic poetry; his examination of these parallels throughout his Renaissance poems demonstrates an increasing understanding of their complexities and of their significance for Victorians.

A central parallel drawn by Browning between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century is the fifteenth-century belief in its rebirth from a dark age, and the nineteenth-century belief in the idea of progress. Implied by both theories is the belief that the processes of history will be completed because of achieved human perfection, a belief that does not accord with Browning's sense that history is an on-going probationary process, the end and truth of which must remain unknown to men. Sordello is cautioned by a "low voice" against seeking to perfect the "world's story" (VI. 188) since to do so would deny individuals and communities of men throughout history their opportunities to contribute to the fulfillment of God's plans, plans which are imaged as progressing "Vine-like" through an organic time:
Who shall found
Next step, next age—trail plenteous o'er the ground
Vine-like, produced by joy and sorrow
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... and yet
That grandest of the tasks God ever set
On man left much to do...

(V. 197-211)

The low voice's affirmation of God's "tasks" is positive, and is consistent with beliefs expressed in subsequent poems, but there is a sense in Sordello that although such tasks should be fulfilled out of duty, their full potential is not appreciated or celebrated as much as in later poems. 26 "Rabbi Ben Ezra," for example, published in 1864, celebrates the human effort put forth when God's challenging ways mean that human joys are "three-parts pain":

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns each smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain:
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

(VI. 31-36)

His exhortations to "Strive," "dare," and not "grudge the throe" are matched by the Pope in The Ring and the Book (1868) who argues that purgational trials are men's best opportunities:

Was the trial sore?
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!
Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestalled in triumph?

(X. 1182-1186)

God's trials are said to enable men to "master" and to "be pedestalled in triumph." Each man and age, then, experiences trials and
opportunities according to the particularities of their historical milieus which also have universal implications; the universal aspects of human experience, however, do not evidence a lack of progress which would liken the processes of history to those of a treadmill, which is why history is compared in Sordello to a vine growing towards fruition.

Browning, then, does not compare the Italian Renaissance with the English Renaissance or the nineteenth century to show only repeated cycles. The comparisons show similarities and differences, repetitions and achievements, as the characters in the poems respond to historical challenges and "tasks."

Browning's main concern, however, is with the nineteenth-century experiences implied by all of his so-called Renaissance poems. He says of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church": "I pick it out as being a pet of mine, and just the thing for the time—what with the Oxford business, and Camden society and other embroilments." Philip Drew points out that Browning's historical poems are always linked to the nineteenth century and that an appreciation of their background can only enhance our understanding of them. He notes that the poems depend on a fresh insight into their subject, or a subtle playing off of a historical incident against a Victorian theme. A reader who is not equipped with the historical information which Browning assumes is not equipped to read the poem fully. Even casual references to the past or to historical figures are not made by Browning without design: their elucidation almost invariably sharpens the poem's effect.

With these thoughts in mind one can see that the severe Calvinism of Johannes Agricola has its counterpart in the nineteenth-century
evangelical movement, and that "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto" are written in response to the renewed interest in early Italian art. 29

The medieval and Renaissance poems confirm Browning's exploration of nineteenth-century tendencies either to idealize or condemn these historical periods, and to oppose one period to another. Browning's mistrust of such oppositions is reflected in the setting of Sordello in which he weaves medieval and Renaissance elements into an organic time-sequence that shows uneven yet energetic developments grafting changing ideas to existing traditions. The process is one of evolution rather than of a radical rebirth from medieval darkness into the pure white light of the Renaissance. For this reason readers should not limit themselves to an evaluation only of the Renaissance conventions in Sordello; these conventions are interwoven with the poem's medieval conventions, and are used to explore nineteenth-century tendencies to polarize these periods, as well as to underline historical continuities.

The subject of nineteenth-century historicism and the dynamic exchange of ideas among its participants—Browning, Carlyle, Ruskin, Tennyson and Pater, to name only a few—is both vast and fascinating. 30 The Middle Ages, classicism and the Renaissance are responded to in a variety of ways ranging from the idealistic to the pessimistic, depending on the theories of history, religious views and aesthetic theories held by the proponents; in general, though, medievalists maligned the Renaissance, and Hellenists maligned the Middle Ages.

Browning's developing historical expertise is in part fostered by the historicism of his contemporaries as he objectively explores
and mediates among their various forms of idealism and pessimism. A main difference between Browning and his contemporaries lies in his objectivity and range of interests. Carlyle, commenting with characteristic bluntness on the variety of nineteenth-century historical interests, notes that "the domain of History is as a Free Emporium, where all these belligerents peaceably meet and furnish themselves," and Browning's histories reflect the Emporium.

Nineteenth-century medievalists such as Pugin, Rio, Tennyson, Ruskin and Carlyle had utopian images of the Middle Ages as an era of idyllic Christianity, heroism and piety, and viewed angrily the intrusion of Renaissance paganism. Tennyson's Arthurian poems are an apt illustration of some ideals associated with the Middle Ages, and a simple comparison of Galahad's grail quest with the quest experience of Childe Roland indicates the poets' differing responses to medievalism, to poetic subjects, and even to types of religious experiences. Galahad's transcendental union with God is radically unlike Childe Roland's fierce struggle to retain his faith and sanity. Browning discusses some differences between his own and Tennyson's medievalism in a letter written to Isabella Blagden:

I should judge the conflict in the knight's soul the proper subject to describe: Tennyson thinks he should describe the castle, and the effect of the moon on its towers, and anything but the soul.

In effect, Browning attempts to dispel his contemporaries' idealized images of the Middle Ages, an era he finds to be neither simple nor ideal, and not totally unlike the nineteenth century in terms of shared human experiences. Browning's belief that there are no simply ideal
utopias in human history is related to his sense of historical realities, and the historical continuities of God's ways to men and women: providence, tribulation, goodness, and perversity can be found in any era of human history, "the confused shifting sort of Eden tale" (IV. 306).

The nineteenth-century quest for Eden, though, led many Victorians to herald the Middle Ages as a paradise lost. Those who idealized the period wanted Victorians to conform to what they believed to be ideal, and equated Victorian moral turpitude with that of the Renaissance. Consider, for example, the full title of Pugin's Contrasts: or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day, Showing the Present Decay of Taste. Pugin argues that the real origin of the revived Pagan and Protestant principles is to be traced to the decayed faith throughout Europe in the fifteenth century, which led men to dislike, and ultimately forsake, the principles and architecture which originated in the self-denying Catholic principle, and admire and adopt the luxurious styles of ancient Paganism.

Pugin's medievalism typifies a selective reading of history through eyes confined to Catholicism and architecture.

Carlyle's contrast of a non-mechanical Christian age with a dehumanized, mechanical nineteenth century is more objective. The past of Past and Present is not paradisal in the conventional sense, since it contains imperfect human beings; but it provides a dynamic image of a unified Christian society humbly striving to fulfill God's purposes by electing a responsible leader who will devote himself to responsible, obedient citizens. Carlyle's influence on Browning,
particularly as it is reflected in Sordello, is colored by the ambiguities of a young poet's admiration for the Victorian sage who wrote Sartor, yet who urged him to write serviceable prose rather than unintelligible poetry. The early Browning was interested in the relations between history, philosophy, religion and poetry, and was therefore interested in the sage's view of these things.

Browning shared Carlyle's love of history, his beliefs that "history is the essence of innumerable Biographies," that "only he who understands what has been, can know what should and will be." They differed, however, in a variety of ways, including their choice of biographical subjects, their opinions of the nineteenth century and, most importantly, their theories of poetry. While Carlyle wrote about kings and tyrants, Browning celebrated the lives of those not often found in history books; Carlyle despaired of a nineteenth century in which Browning had more faith; Carlyle separated the roles of poets, philosophers and priests which Browning hoped to combine.

In his essay "On History" Carlyle writes that artists should try to "body forth some glimpses of the unspeakable Beauty," implying a Platonic and transcendental theory of art (supported in his lecture on "The Hero as Poet") which Browning, after Pauline, resisted. After Carlyle's death, in a typically charitable fashion, Browning says "his opinions about men and things one inch out of his own little circle never moved me with the force of a feather. . . . But we must not ourselves prove ingrates. . . . He wrote Sartor--and such letters to me in these old days!"

One can see that while Browning did not always agree with Carlyle and his followers, he continued to respond to their ideas in poems such
as Sordello in which the protagonist considers the history of poetry and the poet's relation to history, and achieves a broader vision of the function and realm of poetry. Writers such as Carlyle stimulated Browning's more objective reading of history and the varieties of nineteenth-century historicism led him to search for and establish historical continuities that other Victorians overlooked in their quests for utopias and apocalypses against which to measure their discontent.

Ruskin, for example, expressed an evangelically Protestant dislike for an Italianate Renaissance he equated with the disintegration of a utopian medieval period and which he believed heralded modern social and aesthetic malaise. John D. Rosenberg calls Ruskin's The Stones of Venice "a Christian epic" which tells of "a Gothic paradise lost". The serpent of Renaissance paganism corrupted the medieval paradise admired by Ruskin.

Ruskin founds an entire reading of cultural history basically upon his interpretations of medieval and Renaissance architecture, and his enthusiasm for "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" is understandable:

I know of no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I have said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the Stones of Venice.

Ruskin's comments imply that Browning shared his antagonism towards the Italian Renaissance, which is partly justified since Browning, like Ruskin, is aware of the implications of architectural aberrations such
as the Bishop's tomb. Yet the poem also alludes subtly to the Christian and classical traditions Browning believed contributed to the Christian humanism of the Renaissance which Ruskin overlooked and which cannot be characterized only by the architecture of a period.

Sordello, like "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," reflects to a certain extent the skeptical attitude towards Italian Renaissance extremes typified by Ruskin and Carlyle: characters in Sordello such as Count Richard, Ecelino, Salinguerra, and Sordello take Renaissance individualism to its extreme. Browning's representation in Sordello of libertinism and tyranny is in keeping with what Carlyle and Ruskin associated with the Renaissance spirit; it also approximates images of the Renaissance found in Shelley's The Genci and Byron's Beppo. Browning's response to these images of the Renaissance, however, is not to contrast them with idealized images of the Middle Ages in the fashion of Carlyle and Ruskin, but to investigate the spectrum of Renaissance culture and literature, its politics and its people, in search of sustaining principles represented in Sordello by allusions to Saint Euphemia's Church and the paintings of Guidone, by the character of Palma, and by the teachings of the "low voice": all of these are shown to affirm God's providence and human creativity, and to offset Renaissance extremes. Other Victorians were less objective than Browning, but shared his interest in the Renaissance, and were attracted in particular to Italian humanists such as Dante and Petrarch.

In 1832, for example, Gabriele Rosetti published the "Disquisizioni Sullo Spirito Antipapale" in which he attempted to prove that Dante and Petrarch were heretics. His theories were wittily and vehemently
protested by Arthur Hallam in a response entitled Remarks on Professor Rosetti's 'Disquisizioni Sullo Spirito Antipapale,' published in 1832 by Edward Moxon as an anonymous pamphlet. Hallam greatly admired Dante and Petrarch, and had delivered in 1831 at Trinity College a lecture, subsequently published, on The Influence of Italian Works of Imagination on The Same Class of Compositions in England in which he claimed that "the mighty Florentine" Dante initiated the development of modern literature. Carlyle, too, expressed great admiration for Dante: in his lecture "The Hero as Poet," the Divine Comedy is singled out as "the most remarkable of all modern books." Both Hallam and Carlyle believed the best poets to be visionaries, and praised the beauty, divinity and truth of Dante's poetry.

Leigh Hunt was another of Browning's contemporaries contributing to the revival of interest in Italian Renaissance literature. Hunt published in 1816 The Story of Rimini, a poem based on a tale of Dante's, and in 1846 published Stories From the Italian Poets, some of which were Dante's. Similar pursuits were undertaken by Walter Savage Landor, referred to in Sordello as a writer of "great verse" (III. 951).

Landor based several of his Imaginary Conversations on Italian medieval and Renaissance personalities: he published "Boccaccio and Petrarca" in 1829, "Dante and Beatrice" in 1845, and "Fra Lippo Lippi" in 1846.

The historical Sordello, too, had attained some heroic stature in his native Italy, a situation which intrigued not only Browning in the 1830's, but also Mrs. William Busk: her version of Sordello was published in 1837, while Browning was working on his Sordello, and is a dull, conventional romance which is a poor imitation of the romances of writers such as Sir Walter Scott. Her idealized images of the life
of a troubador, knight, and lover in the Middle Ages, and descriptions of medieval customs, were exactly the kind of thing Browning was reacting against in his own thirteenth-century poem; it is quite likely that the appearance of her work confirmed in Browning's mind the need for the kind of poetry he was writing that integrated, rather than isolated, the experiences of a past historical age with those in the nineteenth-century.

What this list illustrates is that the subjects of medievalism and the Italian Renaissance were very much a current issue before, during and after the writing of Sordello, and could well have induced him to explore and express his own perceptions of their implications, particularly since his ideas were different from those of writers such as Shelley or Carlyle. It is appropriate here to repeat Browning's belief that "Italy is stuff for the use of the North, and no more: Poetry there is none, nearly as possible none, in Dante even." One might also consider here the omission of Dante from the list of worthy poets invoked during the opening lines of Sordello, a curious omission given the poem's thirteenth-century Italian setting and the fact that Dante is mentioned elsewhere in the poem. The poets invoked include the English poets Sidney and Shelley, and the significance of this choice is discussed fully in Chapter Four which evaluates Browning's response to poetry in Sordello. It is sufficient to mention here that Browning's response to Dante, to the Italian Renaissance, and especially to its poetry, is decidedly different from that of many of his contemporaries in that he does not hold them up as ideals to which the nineteenth-century should aspire. His more temperate response to the Italian Renaissance warrants comparison with the more idealistic
responses of Burckhardt, Symonds, Arnold, and Pater whose views best express the nineteenth-century responses to the Renaissance which have so consistently shaped our modern views.

Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, published in 1860, relies heavily on the idea of a radical shift from the bonds of the Middle Ages to the aesthetic and intellectual individualism of the Renaissance. Although Burckhardt admired the culture and individualism of the Italian Renaissance, his Swiss-Protestant background made him acutely skeptical of the Italianate paganism and libertinism also questioned by the medievalists:

The fundamental vice of this character was at the same time a condition of its greatness, namely excessive individualism. . . . If therefore egoism in its wider as well as narrower sense is the root and fountain of all evil, the more highly developed Italian was for this reason more inclined to wickedness than the members of other nations at that time.\(^{51}\)

Browning is equally skeptical of the "excessive" individualism of men such as the Duke in "My Last Duchess" (1842) who is a tyrannical, libertine aesthete who chooses "Never to stoop" (l. 43), and who is in process of choosing yet another duchess upon whom to impose his will. The tyranny, libertinism, and aestheticism of Sordello's Salinguerra provide an even more chilling portrait of Renaissance excessiveness, and he is the perfect embodiment of the political intrigue, wealth, and unscrupulousness of the Machiavellian principles which certain Victorians equated with the Italian Renaissance. In the running titles added to the 1863 edition of the poem he is described as satanic, and, like Milton's Satan, his malevolence is camouflaged by his cultured ways: he speaks Greek, makes rhymes, has physical
prowess and is a patron of the arts; in short, he embodies all the promise of Renaissance-education and culture, but is without ethics. Throughout Sordello he is imaged in terms of iron, action, blood and war—he is "Bacchus" to Sordello's "Apollo," and they together reflect a two-sided coin of Italian Renaissance extremes. Browning in the 1830's was even more sensitive to these extremes than was Burckhardt, who nonetheless acknowledged them.

Burckhardt's successor, John Addington Symonds, began his The Renaissance In Italy in 1873, a study which clearly exemplifies nineteenth- and twentieth-century tendencies to idealize the Renaissance and to overlook the "wickedness" considered by Browning and Burckhardt:

The arts and the inventions, the knowledge and the books . . . had long lain neglected on the shores of the Dead Sea which we call the Middle Ages. It was not their discovery which caused the Renaissance. But it was the intellectual energy, the spontaneous outburst of intelligence, which enabled mankind at that moment to make use of them.52

Symonds' opposition between the medieval Dead Sea and the Renaissance "spontaneous outburst" typifies the tendency to isolate historical periods and to substitute radical swings of a pendulum for the alternative of historical continuity; these attitudes towards history and the Renaissance are still evident in critical discussions of Browning's Renaissance poems. 53

Matthew Arnold's response to the Renaissance lies somewhere between the responses of Burckhardt and Symonds, and is expressed most clearly in Culture and Anarchy:
The Renascence, that great reawakening of Hellenism, that irresistible return of humanity to nature and to seeing things as they are, which in art, in literature, and in physics produced such splendid fruits, had, like the anterior Hellenism of the Pagan world, a side of moral weakness and of insensitivity of the moral fibre, which in Italy showed itself with the most startling plainness....

Arnold, while sensitive to what he calls the "anterior Hellenism," establishes a pendulum-like historical rhythm in his opposition of the Hebraic Middle Age to the Hellenic Renaissance, which is in turn opposed to the Reformation. Hebraism is equated with an acute consciousness of sin, a belief in human degeneracy, and a sense that obedience overrides intelligence. Conversely, Hellenism is associated with a belief in the nobility and intelligence of man, and the desire to see things as they are. Arnold, like Browning, uses history to lend shape and meaning to human experience, but unlike Browning tends to be melancholy about times past. Arnold sought to offset nineteenth-century materialism and utilitarianism with an Hellenic "harmonious expansion of all the powers" and saw in Hellenism a dynamic image of human perfection which would go "beyond religion, as religion is generally conceived by us." The phrase "as religion is generally conceived by us" underlines Arnold's conception of Hebraism: he equates the Middle Ages and Reformation only with asceticism and an acute consciousness of human sinfulness. Arnold's response to Hebraism-and Christian humanism seems limited, and indicates a narrow reading of Northern humanists such as Chaucer, Sidney, Donne, and Browning who affirm God's creation of all that is natural in a more than ascetic way.
Warren Anderson points out that Arnold's image of the classical past is selective: "Arnold claimed to think historically, and the classical past did have reality for him. He also idealized it, however, frequently ignoring its historicity in favor of what he saw as its timeless values." This position is supported by David J. DeLaura's observation that Arnold was "uninformed" about classical history. The difference between Arnold's and Browning's responses to nineteenth-century Hellenism is noted by John Maynard:

In poems such as "Karshish" and "Cleon" (1855) Browning would separate himself from the tendency of his century to return to an idealized classical or neoclassical world. But if the classical past was not for him the model that it often seemed to a contemporary such as Matthew Arnold, it was nonetheless a storehouse of perceptions about man and of poetic ideas.

Victorians, including Browning, were engaged in a dynamic exchange of ideas about medievalism, the Renaissance, and Hellenism. Walter Pater's The Renaissance indicates that Pater is especially responsive to Arnold's views, and is eager to highlight those parts of history Arnold tends to delete. De Laura points out that Pater, unlike Arnold, "adopts the fervor, the sensuousness, some of the implicit sexuality, and a good deal of the anti-Christian tone." Pater also undermines Ruskin's idealization of the Middle Ages: Richard Stein believes Pater's "chapter on the 'Two Early French Stories,' in extending the Renaissance into the twelfth century, seems aimed at exploding Ruskin's concept of the purity of the Middle Ages." It is ironic that Browning is not considered a participant in these exchanges of ideas, or comparisons of them, most of all in terms of
Sordello, the poem which exploded many of the myths so subtly that few noticed.

It is especially surprising that Pater does not refer directly to Browning's images of the Renaissance which in so many ways anticipate (and Pater comment on) his own. 62 Pater's The Renaissance is a fascinating paradigm of the dualisms Browning saw in the Italian Renaissance, and in nineteenth-century images of it. Pater celebrates the "joyous sensuousness" of Renaissance pagan art at the same time as he admires the transcendental qualities of sculpture which is "etherealising, spiritualising, relieving its stiffness, its heaviness and death." 63 Browning in Sordello incorporates exactly these kinds of dualities into his description of the font-tomb he uses to emblematize Renaissance dualities, and which inspires in Sordello a similar tension between "joyous sensuousness" and "spiritualising." Such dualisms are also experienced by Fra Lippo Lippi, who perceives that the world, and by implication the flesh, "means intensely, and means good" (l. 314), yet who distorts this perception to vindicate his naturalism rather than to explore the possibilities of a mutually sustaining relationship between flesh and soul. A similar yet more sophisticated inability to reconcile these extremes is experienced by the sensitive, troubled, and confused Caponsacchi in The Ring and the Book, torn between the vows of his priesthood and his desire to protect Pompilia which he claims is not tainted by erotic love. His descriptions of her, however, use images which are typical of courtly love and Petrarchist traditions, and undermine his professions of only spiritual love. In both poems Browning is reflecting his sense of some of the complications engendered by extremes within the Catholic Church and
the Italian Renaissance, extremes which have influenced both Fra Lippo Lippi and Caponsacchi.

It is these same extremes and polarities which are the subject of Sordello, and with which its protagonist and nineteenth-century narrator grapple in their endeavours to establish the realm of the poet-king in imperfect, war-ravaged kingdoms. Sordello's dualisms reflect Browning's early understanding of the Italian Renaissance, its promise, its failings, its place in Browning's developing sense of the historical continuities between Renaissance and Victorian, Italian and Northern men and women. Sordello also reflects Browning's sense of the differences between the Italian and northern response to the ideas generated by the Renaissance, particularly through its contrasts between the Italianate Sordello and the English narrator. Readers who interpret Sordello in relation to the implications of its historical setting will appreciate more comprehensively the scope of Browning's ambitions and achievements; they will also be interpreting the poem within its intended context, and will therefore have a better understanding of the poem's themes and characters which are developed in relation to, not in isolation from, the poem's setting. An appreciation of what Browning is doing with his thirteenth-century setting also helps resolve some of the critical problems with the poem discussed in the concluding section of Chapter One.
III

"Who will, may hear Sordello's story told. . . ."
(I. 1)

Sordello is an eclectic poem which reflects the energy of a poet interested in all human endeavours; attempts to reduce the poem to a single theme or idea serve only to limit the scope of Browning's ambitions and to frustrate those making the attempts. The poem is about many things--it literally seethes with ideas and images--but it is about some things more than others. It is primarily a poem about the making of poetry, and is therefore about poets and theories of poetry, about what the young Browning thought poets should be concerned with and reflect in their poetry. Sordello reflects a poet's interest in history, secular love, divine love, religion, aesthetic theory, architecture, painting, philosophy--and more. It is a semi-dramatic poem about poetic and historical processes in which Sordello, the narrator, Palma, and even the Renaissance are represented as striving to fulfill their potential, and it is the process of striving, rather than fulfillment, which energizes the poem. Sordello is vitalized by deliberate imbalances and tensions in its characters, language, and images as Browning recreates in poetry the energy and immediacy of thoughts, conversations, and events, avoiding the creation of characters who are static, perfect, and therefore to his mind lacking in soul. Readers who remonstrate against Sordello's lack of harmony in style and character, who prefer that poets be prophetic rather than dramatic, are both misconstruing Browning's intentions and undermining his achievement.
The remainder of the first chapter outlines the critical problems encountered by such readers, and introduces the main themes explicated in subsequent chapters. Browning's concerns in Sordello are those he cultivated throughout his canon: secular love, religious controversy, and aesthetic theories are given stories and shapes again and again in Browning's pageantry which is never dull, and never seems repetitious. He had a potent imagination which recognized in unusual circumstances the people and events of which telling stories are made, and Sordello reflects this capacity. Here, the poem's nineteenth-century narrator has decided to tell the story of a thirteenth-century Italian poet whose claim to fame is a few references in Dante's Purgatory and some conventional chansons about chivalry and Platonic love. With the alloy of his imagination Browning manipulated these few rather insignificant facts to create a poem that has gained the reputation of being not only difficult but indecipherable. Mrs. Carlyle was unable to determine if Sordello was a man, a book, or a city, while Thomas R. Lounsbury described it as "a colossal derelict upon the sea of literature." Readers complained about the overabundance of obscure and seemingly insignificant historical details surrounding the thirteenth-century Guelf-Ghibellin conflict (for example, that "Cino Bocchimpane chanced to meet Buccio Virtù" (I. 148-149)), and about abrupt changes of scene from Goito to Verona, from thirteenth-century Ferrara to nineteenth-century Venice. Sordello's narrative, dictions, and rhythms stretch our comprehension of the English language to the limit, making it even more difficult for readers to assemble plot, character, and meaning. There are, however, great rewards in store for the stubborn and the curious, and for
those willing to trust Browning. The story turns out to be a fascinating vehicle for the young Browning's exploration of nineteenth-century concerns, including the renewed interests in medieval and Renaissance conventions as they affect nineteenth-century responses to secular love, religious controversy, and theories of poetry. A further reward in Sordello is our observation of the young Browning's honing of a language suited to poetry in response to the post-Coleridgean, post-Shelleyan dilemma that

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

(II. 602-604)

Browning in Sordello is experimenting with the techniques of a poetry he wants to mirror the energy and flux of human consciousness and psychology; he seeks poetic techniques which will mirror and imitate possible human thoughts and actions, a response to poetry which has its roots in the Aristotelian tradition. In particular, Browning is experimenting with techniques of poetry related to narrative point of view, and these experiments have caused readers to have trouble distinguishing between Sordello and the narrator, and establishing Browning's position in the poem. Thus, readers have equated both Sordello and the narrator with Browning; most, however, tend to equate Browning with the poem's narrator and refer more to Browning than to the narrator. Readers who consistently equate Browning with Sordello or the narrator, when they encounter ideas which they do not believe to be Browning's, accuse him of being either too personally involved with his subjects or of being contradictory and confused; it is the
argument of this thesis that both Sordello and the narrator are characters within a fiction over which Browning has a poet's control, and from which he is ultimately detached.

The poem reflects the predilection discussed in Browning's preface to *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842, to speak through the "utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine"; both Sordello and the narrator are "imaginary" persons. This does not mean, however, that their thoughts and experiences have never been thought or experienced by Browning, or that readers cannot discern in them some of Browning's principles. Indeed, critics frequently cite passages by both as being exemplary of Browning's ideas on a particular subject. What readers need to do, however, is to consider excerpts from Sordello in relation to their context and the poem's dramatic processes, in relation to who is saying what and at what point in the poem.

It is clear to most readers that the narrator's ideas, particularly as they are implied through his discussions of poetry, and through his poem, Sordello, are closer to Browning's than are those of Sordello. Browning through these characters is contrasting two responses to poetry and to human experience: Sordello is shown to typify tendencies common in the Italian Renaissance and in the nineteenth century, while the narrator's response to these tendencies is analogous to those in the English Renaissance. The narrator is shown responding to Sordello's vacillations between Neoplatonic idealism and cynical libertinism, extreme and polarized attitudes towards experience the narrator seeks in his poem to offset with creative and sustaining alternatives. This thesis argues that the narrator's developing perceptions about Sordello, about history, about human experience and about poetry,
provide a dynamic structural unity in Sordello that is intended to offset Sordello's inconsistent responses to secular love, religious experience, and poetry. The narrator's example also mirrors the attempts of a nineteenth-century poet seeking to understand and reflect in his poetry the implications of human fallibility throughout history, including Sordello's; the narrator wants to bring this into relation with his faith in God's providence and human potential, something he is able to do in Sordello. He is not able to do so, however, without a struggle, a struggle that is analogous in the poem to the view that human existence is a probationary, purgative experience during which men and women are urged to be creative and God-like. Through the writing of his poem he responds to God's provision of challenges and opportunities which enable men in history and through time to cure their infected wills and to merit redemption.

The process of writing Sordello shows the narrator's human weaknesses and strengths, but towards the end of the process he is characterized as having been tempered by the experience, and as having achieved a greater understanding of his protagonist, Sordello, and of the function of poetry. In the beginning he is alternately idealistic about and skeptical of Sordello's vacillations between transcendent idealism and libertinism, and frequently describes him in ambivalent terms. To understand the purpose of this ambivalence readers should address themselves more fully to the implications of subtle incongruities to be found in the text of the poem, such as in the narrator's description of his protagonist:
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; you can believe
Sordello foremost in the regal class
Nature has broadly severed from her mass
Of men and framed for pleasure.

(I. 468-475)

The attractiveness of Sordello's physical countenance is enhanced by adjectives such as "fine" and "calm" which, in conjunction with the mentioning of his "soul," would conventionally imply Sordello's goodness. Incongruencies, however, are introduced by the emphasis on Sordello's physicality: he is "framed for pleasure," for "Delight at every sense," a description more suited to a libertine courtier than to a celebrated poet. Sordello is subsequently described as having "the mark/ Of leprosy upon him" (I. 575-576) and while we are not told specifically what the "mark" is, it is important that we recognize the narrator's changed response to his protagonist. His doubts must somehow be reconciled with the exuberant praise accorded Sordello by the narrator as he imagines himself talking to Dante. Sordello the leper is now favorably imaged as Dante's "herald-star":

"Gate-vein of this hearts' blood of Lombardy,
(If I should falter now)--for he is Thine!
Sordello, thy forerunner, Florentine!
A herald-star I know thou didst absorb
Relentless into the consummate orb.

(I. 351-356)

The narrator alternately praises and questions Sordello, vacillations in point of view which have led to an interesting array of critical problems. First of all, as stated above, several readers insist that
there is little or no distinction to be made between the narrator and
Browning. Readers who hold this opinion tend to get into difficulty
when they try to justify or explain the narrator's abrupt shifts in
tone and point of view, and are forced to argue, as Elissa Schagrin
Guralnick does, that 'Browning's sudden reevaluation of his protagonist
in the eleventh hour of the poem fractures the possibility of real
unity within a work dangerously disjointed from the start,' and 'smacks
of a certain dishonesty.' Guralnick fails to keep in mind Browning's
statement in the 1863 dedication for Sordello that his concern was
with the "development of a soul," (emphasis added) a statement imply-
ing that readers should consider process, flux and development in a
cacter at least as much as the end product. The poet-narrator
reminds himself of this shortly after castigating Sordello for his
failures:

The narrator is reminding himself and his readers to consider the
processes and circumstances of Sordello's life which help explain an
"end" which is "piteous"; a similar sense of process should be applied
by readers to their evaluation of the narrator, who is also a dramatic
and imperfect character, but who is not without potential.

Sordello affirms and justifies the dynamic fluctuations and
imperfections evident in human nature and experience, and does so
partly through the sense of process reflected in its language, its
narrative development, and its fallible characters. Browning's sense
of drama in character, and in particular his provision of a dramatic voice which only partly understands the implications of the processes being described in the poem, is also characteristic of the English Renaissance and Elizabethan poems and plays he so much admired; several studies have established correspondences between the techniques and themes of the dramatic poems of Browning and Donne, and similar narrative voices are found in Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* and *Astrophel and Stella*. Browning's characterization of his narrator, then, indicates yet another affirmation and imitation of English Renaissance and Christian-humanist poetic techniques and principles, a subject which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four in terms of Browning's allusions in *Sordello* to Sidney. Readers of Browning's *Sordello*, however, tend on the one hand to believe the narrator is omniscient, and that he speaks for Browning; others resent the narrator's fallibility and assume that Browning has failed to provide within his poem normative or admirable responses to human experience. Such readers have difficulty interpreting the contrasts between the narrator's early bravado and claims to "unexampled themes" that alternate with his self-doubt--"If I should falter now... (I. 353). They also have trouble explaining the narrator's uncertainty about some issues. Michael Yetman assumes that after Book I Browning "makes little effort to sustain the fiction of a distinction between himself and his narrator." Michael Mason, too, refers to the speaker and Browning interchangeably, yet notes that "Browning has some firm but rather vague notions" about the differences between internals and externals in poetry. Robert Columbus and Claudette Kemper are alert to the narrator's fallibility, but do not recognize his developing
perceptions. They believe that Browning "opens the range of experience... by the use of the Speaker," and that the "Speaker ostensibly dramatizes the development of Sordello's soul, but in fact he dramatizes his own buffeting creative-intellectual predicaments." Although their tracing of the narrator's "buffeting" is convincing, they tend to overplay it, along with his arrogance and sense of failure, and do not seem to recognize his growing clarity of thought and expression, the tempering of his response to Sordello and the "Abysmal Past" (I. 20), his developing religious convictions, or his developing sense of the function of poetry. Towards the end of the poem the narrator's perceptions are still developing, yet resemble more closely Browning's beliefs. A sympathetic response to the narrator's imperfect yet persevering attempts to understand the significance of his story and poetic material is essential to our grasp of Browning's dramatization of experiential processes within the poem: for the narrator and for Sordello, the "confused shifting sort of Eden tale" (IV. 306) of life's experiences is one in which "the Best/ Somehow eludes us ever, still might be/ And is not" (VI. 95-97). The nineteenth-century narrator's soul at the end of the poem is in a dynamic state of expansion (he could not have made the preceding statement any earlier) but remains imperfect, which is why he demonstrates a somewhat limited understanding of the significance of his creation, and why critics have trouble understanding his concluding response to his protagonist and poem (the latter is imaged as an unpoetic 'Musk-pod' the reader's nose is urged to "ravage"). An attentive reader who has participated in an imaginative recreation of the experiential processes of the poem, who "has heard Sordello's story told," may emerge with nostrils intact
and with more understanding than the narrator, whose inconclusiveness invites the reader to clarify further the poem's implications. The process of creation is shared by the poet and the participating reader, and illustrates Browning's belief that the processes and function of poetry can be equally stimulating and cathartic for the poet and his readers, and may result in varying degrees of perception.

In addition to the narrator's function as a dynamic image of the cathartic process involved in the creation of a poem, he is used to dramatize Browning's sense of a creative interplay between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. The narrator's response to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is patterned on conventional nineteenth-century responses as he alternately idealizes or repudiates them in, for example, his initial description of the Renaissance as a "glow/And efflorescence out of barbarism" (I. 578-579). His sense of historical realities, however, demands that he at least acknowledge that this "efflorescence" is at times shot through with "leprosy," and that the age of "barbarism" produced Christian heroes such as Charlemagne and St. Francis. The writing of his poem requires that the narrator assimilate and reconcile what seem to be historical paradoxes; that he sort through nineteenth-century facts and opinions about the thirteenth century and a man named Sordello to achieve his own images of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the continuities of human experience in history which make them relevant for the nineteenth century.

What he learns and tells us in Sordello is that history is more than the "Abysmal past," or the "ravage of six long sad hundred years" (I. 9); Sordello's nineteenth-century narrator comes to believe that history enacts God's challenges to a company of men determined to
make it something more fruitful. The 1863 revised version of Sordello contains the following link between human and divine perceptions of history:

'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: what's dispersed
'Save hope of that supreme step which, described
'Earliest, was meant still to remain untried
'Only to give you heart to take your own
'Step, and there stay, leaving the rest alone?
'Where is the vanity? Why count as one
'The first step, with the last step?

(V. 85-94)

It is significant that the processes of history are affirmed for their contributions to a plan designed by God. The revised passage is deliberately more detailed, and positive in tone than its 1840 antecedent in which Sordello is chided for wanting to complete the processes of history himself:

Why count you, one
The first step with the last step?

(V. 85-86)

Browning does, then, become more positive about historical processes and his conception of a God who would mercifully want to "give you heart"; Browning's strengthening convictions can be seen in such revisions of Sordello and in his later Renaissance poems: for Browning, Sordello, and the poet-narrator the reading of history, and the writing of historical poems, are cathartic.

The narrator, then, in many ways provides a structural guide through the intricate corridors of Sordello. His ability to convert his initial vacillation between angry skepticism and frustrated
Notes

1 Robert Browning, Sordello (London: Edward Moxon, 1840). All further references to Sordello appear in the text, and are to this edition unless indicated otherwise. References to The Ring and the Book appear in the text, and are from The Ring and the Book, ed. Richard D. Altick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). References to Browning's other poems appear in the text, and are from the first volume of Robert Browning: The Poems, ed. John Pettigrew, suppl. Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); hereafter cited as The Poems. References to Browning's revisions of Sordello are to this same edition and volume, and are indicated by line or page numbers; references to the "Essay on Shelley" are to this edition and volume, and are indicated in the text by page number.


3 Yetman, "Exorcising Shelley," pp. 82-83.


5 Holmes, "The Sources of Browning's Sordello," p. 487.


7 Johnson, "The Pattern of Italian History," p. 334.

8 Johnson, "The Pattern of Italian History," p. 338.

9 Ruskin says of this poem that he knows "of no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy. . . ." The Works of John Ruskin, ed. E. J. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), VI, 449; hereafter cited as Works.

to secular love, those which debase or place unrealistic expectations on an experience which he believes has the potential to be creative, sustaining, and exemplary of human divinity. These extremes vacillate between the poles of libertine sensuality and Neoplatonic idealism, disallowing the notion of an interdependence between the body and the soul. Medieval and Renaissance literature reflects similar inclinations towards these extremes which resurface in nineteenth-century revivals of interest in these periods. 80

The conventions of medieval courtly love focus on adulterous sexual relationships which the lovers are expected to grow beyond, as the beauty and virtue of the woman inspire her partner to Neoplatonic contemplations of her idealized self, and to similarly virtuous actions. The eroticism with which such relationships begin is eventually scorned as a debased expression of love. Renaissance Petrarchism is similar in terms of its extremes, with a slight variation in pattern: unlike the courtly love tradition, Petrarchism is rooted in Neoplatonic ideals which seemingly concentrate on beauty and virtue, but which often reveal a sublimated eroticism. Sordello's response to secular love is a paradigm of these extremes: as a courtly lover his goal is erotic:

\[
\text{Naught so sure} \\
\text{As that to-day's adventure will secure} \\
\text{Palma, the visioned lady--only pass} \\
\text{O'er yon damp mound and its exhausted grass,} \\
\text{Under that brake where sundawn feeds the stalks} \\
\text{Of withered fern with gold, into those walks} \\
\text{Of pine and take her!} \\
\]

\[
\text{She will emerge} \\
\text{Flushed, now, and panting.} \\
\]

(II. 13-35)
Sordello's erotic impulses, however, are sublimated when he actually meets Palma--instead of taking her in acceptable courtly fashion, he swoons into a "luscious trance" (II. 132) which "shut the whole scene from his sense" (II. 112). Erotic impulses may invite the "luscious trance," but are soon sublimated in true Petrarchist fashion.

Palma, like the women in conventional medieval and Renaissance literature, is on the one hand viewed as the object of physical desire, and on the other hand placed on a pedestal befitting her saintly status. An important theme of Sordello is that such extremes tend to be destructive, and to result in tragedy and frustration: the romantic relationship of the fated Sordello and Palma is threatened by wars, conniving fathers, and political intrigue, but none of these is as destructive as Sordello's confused images of women as sinners or saints. It is the extremes of the courtly love tradition which underline Browning's portrayal of Sordello as a lover vacillating between the extremes of desiring and worshipping the lady of his choice, a vacillation which results in a paralyzing inability to respond to secular love in a reciprocal, fulfilling way: Palma is imaged by Sordello as saint, seductress, and mother--never as wife.

The function of the relationship of Palma and Sordello in the poem has not received much attention from critics, which is surprising, since it is related to many of the poem's key themes. Through Browning's dramatization of their relationship we see his skeptical response to the kind of love exemplified by the courtly and Petrarchist traditions still popular in the nineteenth century. Arthur Hallam, for example, was in 1832 translating sonnets from Dante's Vita Nuova; Dante's sonnets are largely devoted to idealizations of Beatrice.
Dante Gabriel Rossetti's later (1861) translations of the early Italian poets are still considered to be masterpieces, and reflect a sustained nineteenth-century interest in Italian Renaissance poetry.

Browning, too, is contributing through Sordello to nineteenth-century images of the early Renaissance, and his characterization of the poem's heroine, Palma, draws on conventions of Italian love poetry. Palma's role in the poem has received insufficient critical appraisal, and what exists tends to misjudge Browning's use of her in this early exploration of secular love. Readers tend either to reprove or to idealize Palma, and their opinions stem from their response to her resistance to Sordello's desire for a transcendental, withdrawn relationship, and her insistence that he accept social responsibility. W. David Shaw, for example, argues that "Palma represents personal values that supercede the social ones." Palma's personal values may be considered in relation to the needs of Sordello, but they do not "supercede the social ones." Shaw goes on to complain that subsequent to Sordello's choice of Palma "as the object of his quest he abandons all efforts to search in the world outside himself and her for an embodiment of his ideal." It is ironic that Shaw blames only Palma for Sordello's withdrawal into the totality of their relationship and overlooks Palma's attempts to redirect this tendency, to tell Sordello "of another want/ Goito's quiet nourished than his own" (III. 307-308). Early in their relationship Sordello tries to make Palma the "object of his quest," but she resists this attempt and persuades him that poets, too, have social responsibilities.

Palma's sense of duty is questioned by Columbus and Kemper who believe she seeks only to manipulate Sordello towards the fulfillment
of her political ambitions: "Palma, in whose affinity Sordello had felt secure, prates about how best to use Sordello in the political arena. Love therefore is deaf; it too fails Sordello."\textsuperscript{83} The belief of these readers that secular love should be a totality within itself unrelated to the world and time clouds their ability to see that Browning, through Palma, is actively questioning this kind of response to secular love. The relationship of Palma and Sordello is tragic and frustrating, a relationship to be questioned, not idealized. Elissa Schagrin Guralnick, however, tries to idealize it, and the similarly tragic love of Pompilia and Caponsacchi, arguing that their love is "in this world a resounding if glorious impossibility. . . . It seems the peculiar destiny of an out-soul to destroy herself and her beloved with the splendid mission she enjoins upon him--the peculiar triumph of her state that such destruction is ultimately preferable to life. Thus, the Palma who breaks in upon Sordello's last breath is rightfully a participant in his joyful agony."\textsuperscript{84} Guralnick's belief in Browning's elevation of a tragic love experience as a "joyful agony" enacts precisely the idealization of tragedy, paradoxes, and frustration in secular love which Browning tries to offset with examples provided by Palma and Sordello, and the narrator's developing response to them.

Throughout the poem Sordello remains true to the conventions of courtly and Petrarchan love which Palma resists. He is at various points in the poem a courtly lover, a Neoplatonic Petrarchist and a libertine Renaissance courtier, unable to reconcile his body with his soul, or his physicality with his vision of Palma as the Neoplatonic embodiment of beauty and virtue. Palma's sense of active duty represents an alternative response to the conventions of secular love.
characteristic of Sordello. The readers' sense of Browning's skepticism towards conventions which idealize tragic relationships hovering tenuously between extremes is guided by his use of what is unconventional, the characters of Palma and the narrator who place secular love in a humanistic, quasi-religious context which integrates rather than separates the body and the soul. These characters offset both Sordello's unresolved dualisms and the libertine aestheticism of Taurello Salinguerra, and represent creative, sustaining responses to secular love which affirm the world and time in relation to infinity. Browning uses these same characters to develop the religious implications of his poems: their faith and beliefs are suggested by and related to their humanistic responses to secular love.

Readers of Sordello have not in general been concerned with the explication of its religious themes despite the implications of the poem's historical setting (a civil war between Church and State) and of Browning's statement that his emphasis in the poem is on "the incidents in the development of a soul." It is assumed by most critics that this soul (Sordello) develops mainly in aesthetic terms, the same terms they use to discuss themes such as the relationships between body and soul, time and eternity, human and divine will. In their critical evaluations of these themes readers cannot but imply a religious context in Sordello, but they seem reluctant to suggest that Browning is consciously exploring and commenting on nineteenth-century religious problems shared with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Sordello reflects in many ways Browning's belief that poets should concern themselves with the universal inclinations towards transcendentalism and rationalism, idealism and skepticism that are
part of any response to religion, whether it be in the thirteenth or nineteenth century. In *Sordello* Browning dramatizes the problems and ironies associated with these extremes without confining them to particular religious creeds, and suggests aspects of various religions which appeal to his developing religious convictions.

Browning's representations of his religious beliefs stress the experiential more than the doctrinal, and it is difficult to align him with a particular religion. Philip Drew argues that it "is not possible to derive from Browning's work any coherent body of Christian doctrine which can be ascribed to the poet as a consistent statement of religious belief." The operative word in Drew's argument is "doctrine," since it is true that Browning cannot, in a merely doctrinal way, be proved to be specifically of one religion or another. Yet, as William Raymond points out, "Browning frequently attains to the cardinal truths of Christian faith in undogmatic fashion." The challenge for readers of Browning's poetry is to determine which "cardinal truths" he reflects, and to establish in which poems these truths are represented: it will be argued that at least in part they are present in a poem as early as *Sordello*.

Browning criticism traditionally asserts that his early poetry does not reflect the religious interests of the later poetry. The publication date of *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* in 1850 is viewed by many as a crucial point in Browning's developing response to religion because of the overtly religious themes evolving from the dramatic situation of a persona who feels compelled to choose a specific religion. We are told by C.H. Herford, for example, that "no single poem written before 1850 shows any acute interest in the problems of
Christian faith which constantly emerges in the work of this and the following years. A close reading of Sordello, however, indicates that Browning was certainly interested in "the problems of Christian faith" long before 1850, although he does not adopt a particular religious creed. Sordello reflects Browning's exploration in the 1830's of the history and tenets of religion, his inquiring mind, honest doubts and developing religious convictions.

Critical discussions of Browning's religious tenets conventionally separate the youthful from the mature Browning, associating his youth with Shelley, God and Evangelicalism, and his maturity with his response to the Incarnation as the historical event which unites the human with the divine. Those who wish to align the youthful Browning with a particular religion invariably choose Evangelicalism. William Raymond, for example, argues that "so far as Browning can be claimed by a religious party his affiliations lie with the Evangelicals." We are rightly cautioned against this kind of judgement by John Maynard, in whose opinion "there is little ground for the suggestion of narrow dissenting background with which Browning is often stereotyped." As Maynard asserts, Browning "was more often the eclectic, independent Christian who never would choose a specific church but sampled one minister or another to see what he might have to offer." Maynard's arguments are the most persuasive, and should be considered in relation to the fact that in his poetry Browning explores and responds to specific controversial religious problems such as the significance of the humanity of Christ, the degree to which the human will is free, and the role of the Church throughout history. Most readers would agree that Browning does indeed concern himself with
these religious problems; there would be some debate, however, as to
the stages in Browning's religious and poetic development when he
achieved what would be considered his mature religious position. It
will be shown that in Sordello Browning implies a response to the Son's
humanity not normally attributed to him before the 1849 revisions of
Paracelsus, and that Browning is quite skeptical of many tenets of
Evangelicalism, particularly those regarding the human will, transcen-
dentalism, and the desire for a mystical relationship with God that
separates one from the community of men. Through Sordello's character
we see the limitations of Evangelicalism; through the developing reli-
gious convictions of the poet-narrator we see a mind questioning the
cardinal truths of Christianity throughout an ongoing religious
experience, drawing tentative conclusions about the significance of
human experience. In Sordello readers can see the youthful Browning
in the process of developing some religious convictions, dramatizing
in the poem the kinds of doubts and speculations apt to be considered
by a nineteenth-century poet concerned with the history, nature, and
quality of religious experience.

It is unwise to separate Browning's representation in Sordello
of kinds of religious experience from the variety of aesthetic theories,
and theories of poetry operative in the poem, as Sordello and the
narrator seek to establish "what might be singing's use" (II. 497).
The motives and deeds of the Christian hero are inextricably related to
those of the Christian poet, and it is to these goals that Sordello and
the narrator ultimately aspire in their quest to determine the function
of poetry.
The theme of aesthetic and poetic theory in Sordello has been the subject of a good deal of convincing critical commentary which focuses, and rightly so, on the nineteenth-century implications of the poem. Robert R. Columbus and Claudette Kemper point out that

Sordello heralds almost every major theme of the Victorian age: the conflict of a creative imagination with experience; the isolation of society from the artist, and the isolation of an audience from a speaker; the inability of pure will to create value with no external supports for it; the problems of accuracy for prophecy; the failure of human love as a redemptive force; the failure of language to express perception; the dawning comprehension of the smog in semantics.92

Critics such as Lionel Stevenson and Michael Yetman also explore the poem's nineteenth-century implications, emphasizing its transitional function between Romantic and Victorian aesthetics. Stevenson therefore celebrates Sordello as the "Key Poem of the Victorian Age"93 while Yetman suggests that "the shift might be described as a movement away from the Promethean savior in poetry and toward the Victorian sage.94 Such arguments are supported in Sordello by the number of allusions to Romantic literature used to underlie Sordello's aesthetic inclinations which are offset by the narrator's more Victorian concerns. These critical observations of the nineteenth-century implications of Sordello, however, need to be aligned with the additional perspective provided by the poem's thirteenth-century setting. This perspective will add to existing perceptions about the poem's Victorian themes, and to a fuller understanding of Browning's sense of the continuities between thirteenth- and nineteenth-century attitudes towards the function of poetry and of the role of the poet.
Browning notes striking similarities between the aesthetic theories prevalent during these two periods. Sordello's thirteenth-century dedication to the revival of neo-classical ideals of individualism, of aesthetic and cultural perfection, portrays a rejection of Church-dominated medieval art and religion which in some ways anticipates the extremes of what Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) identified as Hellenism and Hebraism predominant in nineteenth-century aesthetic and religious controversies; Eglamor's preoccupation with poetry as a "temple-worship vague and vast" (II. 203) invokes an image of the poet as prophet or mage common to Renaissance and nineteenth-century Neoplatonic poets. Conversely, Naddo demonstrates a thirteenth-century rationalist's mistrust of poetry and poets guilty of "setting up conceits in nature's stead" (II. 12) which anticipates the nineteenth-century utilitarian point of view. Finally, Salinguerra's substitution of culture for the ethical substance of religion, and his aesthetic yet morally corrupt appeal to art for art's sake, is Browning's representation of the ethically bankrupt thirteenth- and nineteenth-century imitators of neo-classical individualism, aestheticism, and culture. Within the frame of these extreme responses to the function of art and poetry are dynamic images of ethical, humanistic responses to poetry and art founded on principles which do not involve a repudiation of the finite world in favour of a visionary dream, or the alternative of naturalism; rather, such principles place the finite world in a reciprocal and mutually sustaining relationship with an infinity which is earned through creative temporal service. The narrator of *Sordello* learns that these principles have sustained the Church and men throughout human history—including the Middle Ages.
the Renaissance, and the nineteenth century. It is his expanding soul which is represented as admirable, normative behaviour in the poem, and whose affinities with the ethical, poetical and religious principles of English Renaissance figures such as Sidney and Donne reflect Browning's attempt to reanimate these principles in ways meaningful for the nineteenth century.

The following chapters explicate Browning's response in *Sordello* to secular love, religious problems, and the growth of a poet. In each chapter the textual analysis involves a contrast between the vacillations of Sordello, who typifies the thirteenth- and nineteenth-century extremes of Neoplatonism and libertinism, and the narrator, whose developing Christian humanism illustrates English Renaissance poetic principles and techniques Browning believes could contribute to a renewal of nineteenth-century poetry. This explication, illuminated by the preceding evaluation of the relations between setting and theme in *Sordello*, should offset tendencies to avoid, dismiss, or underestimate Browning's often maligned poetic undertaking, and should illustrate Sordello's internal unities of language, character, symbols, and themes.

"And you shall hear Sordello's story told."

(*III, 1020*)
Notes


4. Stewart Walker Holmes, "The Sources of Browning's *Sordello*," *Studies in Philology*, 34 (1937), 487; hereafter cited as "The Sources of Browning's *Sordello*."

5. Holmes, "The Sources of Browning's *Sordello*," p. 487.


9. Ruskin says of this poem that he knows "of no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,--its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy. . . ." The Works of John Ruskin, ed. E. J. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), VI, 449; hereafter cited as *Works*.


14 Browning's familiarity with Italian life and culture was cultivated over many years. In 1838 he travelled to Italy for several weeks while working on Sordello, and visited several places mentioned in the poem, including Verona, Padua, and San Zenon. Browning visited Italy again in 1844, and lived there with Elizabeth between 1846 and her death in 1861.

It is clear that he lived in Italy for reasons other than a love for Italian culture, the foremost being his concern for Elizabeth's health and privacy, followed by the easing of financial worries Italy provided.


16 Raymond, The Infinite Moment; p. 201.


19 McAleer, Dearest Isa: "To Isabella Blagden," 19 May 1866, Letter 88, p. 239.


Jack Matthews is another critic who argues that "Neoplatonic ideas are central to much of his [Browning's] thinking, in "Browning and Neoplatonism," Victorian Newsletter, 28 (1965), 9-12. See also Curtis Dahl and Jennifer L. Brewer in "Browning's Saul...

23 One should note in this context Michael Yetman's argument in "Exorcising Shelley," p. 83, that in Sordello Browning is exorcising the once adulated Shelley, and that "the only recognizable Shelleyan traits to be found in the poem are precisely those vaguely idealistic habits of mind that are responsible for the hero's downfall. . . ."

24 Sordello is said to be a medieval poem by Norton B. Crowell in The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of Knowledge (New Mexico: The University of New Mexico Press, 1963). On the other hand, it is said to be a Renaissance poem by Helen Archibald Clarke in Browning's Italy: A Study of Italian Life and Art in Browning (New York: The Baker & Taylor Company, 1907), and by Johnson in "The Pattern of Italian History." No one has evaluated what Browning stood to gain from a setting which drew upon both periods.


26 Browning's revisions of this passage in the 1863 edition of the poem reflect a developing tendency to view the contributions of men to history, and God's providence, even more positively. The processes of history are still imaged as a growing plant, but the image is expanded and is more complete. Also, the addition of "Much done" affirms historical contributions to the fulfillment of God's tasks:

Who is found
'To take next step, next age--tread o'er the ground--
'Shall I say, ground-like?--not the flowers' display
'Nor the root's prowess, but the plenteous way
'O the plant--produced by joy and sorrow

Much done--and yet
'Doubtless that grandest task God ever set
'On man, left much to do:

(V. 205-221)
This thesis takes into account some of Browning's revisions to the poem, most of which were added to the 1863 edition; slight changes were also made for the editions of 1868 and 1888. Browning says in a letter to Furnivall on May 25, 1886, in Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise, ed. Thurman L. Hood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 248; hereafter cited as Letters, that "he cannot remember a single instance of any importance that is 're-written,'" but, as DeVane and Pettigrew point out respectively in A Browning Handbook, p. 71, and The Poems, p. 1039, 85 lines were added to the poem in addition to changes in punctuation; quotation marks and helpful elucidatory running titles were added to the 1863 edition, but the latter were dropped for the edition of 1888.

Of greater significance are the lines added to the text of 1863; the thesis argues that some of them, particularly those regarding historical processes and God's challenging ways, indicate Browning's strengthening affirmations and perceptions which, although present in the 1840 edition, are clarified and presented in more detail and in a more positive tone in the 1863 edition. These revisions were retained for subsequent editions.


30 See Peter Dale in The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 177, for an explanation of the Victorian fascination with history: "the major Victorian poets use history in the way Carlyle says it may best be used, as a philosophical key to the meaning of life in the present. . . . Browning [was] of all Victorian poets certainly the most preoccupied by historical subjects. . . ."


32 For an overview of Victorian medievalism see Alice Chandler, A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century Literature (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970). Also, the 1980 volume of Browning Institute Studies is devoted to the theme of Victorian medievalism. Alice Chandler argues in "Order and Disorder in the Medieval Revival," Browning Institute Studies, 8 (1980), 9, that "medievalism was both a quest for order and a respite from a troubled world."
McAleer, Dearest Isa, "To Isabella Blagden," 19 January 1870, Letter 124, p. 328. Browning's continued interest in Victorian treatments of historical subjects is also reflected in the following comments on George Eliot's Romola, set in the Renaissance. In McAleer, Dearest Isa, "To Isabella Blagden," 19 November 1963, Letter 66, p. 178, he says "there was too much dwelling on the delinquencies of the Greek...--while the great interests, Savonarola and the Republic, which I expected would absorb attention and pay for the previous minuteness, dwindled strangely."

Donald S. Hair in Browning's Experiments with Genre (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 81, discusses Browning's atypical response to the Middle Ages, noting that instead of medieval manners and customs Browning focused on "the irony and moral ambiguity which arises from mixed motives and a complex inner life." Beverly Taylor, in "Browning and Victorian Medievalism," Browning Institute Studies, 8 (1980), 57-71, observes that in his medieval poems Browning modifies the conventions of courtly love, medieval art and quest literature, thereby separating himself from the mainstream of Victorian medievalism. She also observes that while Victorians such as Tennyson were drawn to figures of myth and legend, Browning chose to write about historical figures such as Rabbi Ben Ezra, Pietro of Albano, and Sordello.

See Chandler, A Dream of Order, p. 195, for a discussion of two appeals of medievalism: "one is its naturalism--its identification with nature and the past and thus with simpler and truer modes of feeling and expression and nobler and more heroic codes of action. The other is its feudalism--its harmonious and stable social structure which reconciled freedom and order by giving each man an allotted place in society and an allotted leader to follow."


See Charles Richard Sanders, "Carlyle, Browning, and the Nature of a Poet," Emory University Quarterly, 16 (1960), 197-209, for a discussion of their friendship, Carlyle's advice to Browning, and some allusions in Browning's poetry to Carlyle. (Sordello is not included among these allusions, although the poem is referred to in their letters.)

Carlyle, "On History," Works, II, 86.


It is worth noting that in "On History," Works, II, 93, Carlyle said he valued most the histories of philosophy which he thought should be concerned with "man's opinions and theories respecting the nature of his Being, and relations to the Universe Visible and Invisible." Browning thought these same things were a poet's duty: he says in the "Essay on Shelley," p. 1005, that a poet's duty "is beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man. . . ."
Carlyle, "On History," Works, II, 94.


Ruskin, Modern Painters, Works, VI, 449. Ruskin was equally appreciative of Browning's grasp of medievalism. In Modern Painters, Works, VI, 446-447, he says that "Browning is unerring in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages... There is hardly a principle connected with the medieval temper that he has not struck upon."

Browning's evaluation of Italian Renaissance architecture is much evident in Sordello: the font-tomb by which the young Sordello sits nightly is a potent symbol of the Italian Renaissance, and has a profound effect on Sordello, who represents the extremes of Renaissance thought. The implications of the font-tomb are discussed fully in Chapter Two of the thesis.

Wallace Ferguson in The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1948), p. 254, observes that the "Romantic Renaissance of Stendhal, Byron, and Browning, with all its unholy charm, was exclusively Italian." See also Orr's Life and Letters, p. 31, for a discussion of Browning's response to Byron as his "chief master" during his boyhood days. Maynard in Browning's Youth, pp. 194-195, documents Browning's acquisition of Miscellaneous Poems by Shelley in 1826 or 1827, and lists The Cenci among poems read before the publication of Pauline in 1833. R. D. Jack in "Scott and Italy," in Scott Bicentenary Essays, ed. Alan Bell (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), pp. 283-299, observes on p. 292 that Scott's Italian characters "stem rather often from currently held opinions about Italians in general—their Machiavellianism, their avarice, their interest in the supernatural."

Hallam's text was printed at Cambridge in 1832 by W. Metcalfe under the same title. The text was reprinted in Remains of 1834. It is perhaps worthy of note that Hallam mentions the Guelf-Ghibellin conflict and Sordello. Hallam believes that the meeting in Dante's Purgatory between Sordello and Virgil symbolizes the revival of literature which initiates the modern era. Browning's Sordello does not allude to this scene, and he certainly does not grant it the significance attributed to it by Hallam.

Maynard in Browning's Youth, p. 107, notes that Carlyle was frequently discussed by members of Browning's set, a group of peers with whom he met quite regularly for intellectual discussions during the 1830's and 1840's.

Maynard in Browning's Youth discusses Browning's acquaintance with Hunt. On p. 206 it is said that Browning almost certainly read Hunt's Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries, published in 1828, probably that same year. Browning was introduced to Carlyle at Hunt's home in 1836.
50. Sordello is described as being a forerunner of Dante's, and Dante is mentioned by the narrator elsewhere in Book I. The images used to describe Dante suggest his Christian-Platonic affiliations: he is the "consummate orb" (I. 360) living in an "august sphere" (I. 366).


53. See page 13 for evidence of this among Browning critics.


56. Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, The Complete Prose, V, 94.


59. Maynard, Browning's Youth, p. 301.

60. DeLaura, Hebrew and Hellene, p. 177.


62. Park Honan and William Irvine. in The Book, the Ring, & the Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), p. 467, observe that "Fifine at the Fair some lines (628-630) are "probably intended as a parody of Walter Pater's metaphor for experience" ['a hard, gem-like flame'] in his Conclusion to The Renaissance.

64. See Peter Dale in "Paracelsus and Sordello: Trying the Stuff of Language," Victorian Poetry, 18 (1980), 362, for a discussion of what he believes is "a growing belief on Browning's part that the poetic vocation resides not so much in vision. . . ."; hereafter cited as "Trying the Stuff of Language."

65. C. M. Bowra in "Dante and Sordello," Comparative Literature, 5 (1953), 1-15, contains an account of the historical Sordello's poetic canon; the remains of his poetry include twelve chansons and a didactic poem about chivalrous ideals. Bowra notes that Sordello was a "thorough Platonist" interested in the cult of ideal love. Bowra also discusses Sordello's place in Dante's Purgatory.

66. See Drew, A Critical Introduction, pp. 70-71, for a selection of nineteenth-century derogatory comments about Sordello. Drew uses these comments to preface his discussion of "surface difficulties in Browning's poetry.


68. Park Honan on Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 37; hereafter cited as Browning's Characters, accurately describes Sordello as "a considerable laboratory of experiments with poetry. . . ." Betty Flowers in Browning and the Modern Tradition (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1976), pp. 164-165, discusses the "extreme condensation" of "mental imagery" in Sordello, a poem in which Browning "loads each syntactical unit with a great density of meaning."

69. See Johnson, "the Pattern of Italian History"; Yetman, "Exorcising Shelley"; and Mason, "The Importance of Sordello," for examples of readers who make little or no distinction between Browning and the narrator.


See Daniel Stempel, "Browning's Sordello: The Art of the Makers—See," PMLA, 80 (1965), 554-561, for a discussion of Browning's incorporation of the dramatic stance taken by nineteenth-century dioramic guides. Stempel argues persuasively that the narrator's dramatic poses are part of his attempts to draw the reader into the experience of the poem. One needs to add to this, however, the sense of process implied by his developing soul.

Yetman, "Exorcising Shelley," p. 86.


The narrator chastizes Sordello at the end, blaming him for not having altered the processes of history:

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

(VI. 831-834)

This chastisement implies an inadequate appreciation of the teachings of the "low voice" regarding historical processes and human fallibility; it also indicates the narrator's impatience with fallible men such as Sordello. The narrator, then, is represented as not yet having fully absorbed the implications of his poem, which ends with the open-ended possibility that he will better understand his "story" in the future.

The narrator's and Sordello's consideration of suitable poetic material involves the recollection of some heroic figures in history, particularly those of the Church: see Book V, lines 130-225. This passage is explicated in Chapter Three. Allusions to St. Francis offset the tendency to dismiss the Middle Ages as merely "dark."

See Book V, 132-135:

Ages slip--
Was it Sordello pried into the work
So far accomplished, and discovering lurk
A company amid the other clans.
This is particularly true of Italian medieval and early Italian Renaissance poetry. Thirteenth-century Frederician (or Sicilian) poets wrote courtly love poetry; these conventions were subsequently spiritualized by Dante and Petrarch, and many of Petrarch's retain some of the eroticism.

In England, similar tensions are explored by Malory, who is sensitive to the libertinism of knights practising the art of courtly love, and who cannot quite accept the adulterous relationship of Launcelot and Guinevere idealized by the French. Similarly, Sidney and Shakespeare question Neoplatonic responses to love in Astrophel and Stella and Venus and Adonis, poems which show more objective, humourous, English responses to Italian conventions of love in poetry.

In the nineteenth-century the sensuousness of Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes" reflects some of the tensions between erotic and spiritual responses to Madeline. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" has as its source an Italian novella dated c. 1321. The circle is further extended with Dante Rosetti's translations of the early Italian poets in 1861.


Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, p. 34.


Raymond, The Infinite Moment, p. 27.


Maynard, Browning's Youth, p. 53.

Maynard, Browning's Youth, p. 610.

An exception is William Whitle's The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Robert Browning's Poetry (1963; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967): Whitle argues that Sordello is "the analogy of Christ," p. 14, but discusses this in terms of Christ's office of poet rather than in terms of the exemplary life of service which this thesis argues Browning is also recommending in Sordello.


CHAPTER TWO

Secular Love in Sordello: Conventions and Alternatives

not that a Palma's Love
A Salinguerra's Hate would equal prove
To swaying all Sordello: wherefore doubt,
Love meet for such a Strength, some Moon's without
To match his Sea?

(VI. 90-94)

If Browning had chosen to develop his star-crossed lovers\(^1\) in conventional terms the heroine Palma would "equal prove/ To swaying all Sordello," and the reader's response to the tragic conclusion of their romantic relationship would be more purgative than it is disconsolate. Browning chose, instead, to be unconventional; to explore and even to deflate the popular notion that secular love can and should conquer all. He seems more curious than cynical about the potential and varieties of secular love,\(^2\) and is in Sordello mainly skeptical of the extremes of idealism and libertinism pervasive in conventions of secular love typified in medieval, Renaissance, and nineteenth-century literature. Browning is especially interested in exploring and representing the difficulties in human relationships caused by the extremes of idealism and libertinism, and by the tendency of frustrated idealists to become cynical libertines.\(^3\)

Sordello's response to secular love is developed as a paradigm of the patterns established in a great deal of medieval and Renaissance literature, and is contrasted with the responses of the less conventional
Palma and the narrator. Sordello is shown to have a dualistic response to women and secular love as either spiritual or erotic, and has little sense of the potential interdependence of these spheres. Similarly, he views secular love as an opportunity to withdraw from the world and time into a transcendental sphere of spiritual union unfettered by religious, social or political responsibilities. In effect, the experience of secular love is sought as a refuge from and a substitute for these responsibilities.

Sordello's extreme and problematic responses to secular love are contrasted with those of Palma and the poet-narrator, both of whom are characterized initially as having shared Sordello's idealistic expectations of the experience of secular love. Sordello's ideals are shattered by the realities of his relationship with Palma; the ideals of Palma and the narrator, however, are shaped and tempered by these realities in a variety of sustaining ways. Palma and the narrator avoid being frustrated by the extremes of idealism and libertinism which paralyze Sordello's will as they seek to integrate the physical and spiritual spheres which Sordello insists on separating. Similarly, while Sordello wants to use secular love to withdraw from human experience, Palma and the narrator ultimately view it as an opportunity to fulfill themselves as well as what they perceive to be their religious and social responsibilities. Palma seeks an "out-soul" (III. 314) to love, and to help her fulfill what she believes to be their destiny. The poet-narrator seeks to understand and reflect in his poetry the significance and potential of secular love, and is ultimately able to expand its context from that of merely romantic love to a context which includes his
perceptions of divine love, of a poet's love for humanity, and of the parallels between these kinds of love.

Browning's representations in Sordello of varieties of responses to secular love reflect his life-long fascination with the emotion that motivates human actions ranging from the aberrant to the ennobling: the murderous caresses of "Porphyria's Lover" and the guilt-wracked ministrations of the not-so-priestly Caponsacchi indicate the range and complexity of Browning's interest in this most enigmatic of human inclinations. In Sordello we see the young Browning attempting to represent in poetry motives and influences which have shaped the universal responses to secular love indicated by Sordello and Palma. Browning provides attentively detailed histories of his central characters which enable us to compare and contrast their differing expectations of and responses to the experience of secular love. An examination and comparison of the backgrounds of Sordello and Palma, and in particular of the ideas and images they use to describe them, should provide readers of Browning with a clearer sense of the role and significance of secular love in Sordello, and of Browning's developing concerns.

A discussion of his comparisons of the responses of Sordello and Palma should begin with a consideration of Browning's suggestive adaptation of historical sources. Browning's use of history is liberal, creative and seemingly irreverent; chronology and accuracy are often subordinated to his sense of the people who fleshed out the facts, and to his predilection for illustrating the universal tendencies in human nature which make poetry and history germane for his readers. In these respects, his treatment of the historical Sordello and Palma is typical.
The sources used by Browning were both vague and contradictory, which does not help those interested in fact-finding, but his use of them suggests certain thematic concerns. The historical Sordello was a minor poet, soldier, and courtier whose achievements in these areas have been sentimentalized in Italian chronicles. His love exploits, in particular, captured the fancy of those impressed by courtly lovers and Renaissance courtiers--according to almost every legend Sordello had an affair with a woman named Cunizza while she was married to Count Richard of Boniface (during one of her five marriages).

Browning does not adhere to or sentimentalize these details; instead, he blends fact with fiction to shape Sordello into a figure representative of his understanding of the extremes inherent in the Italian Renaissance, and in nineteenth-century images of it. He retains and embellishes Sordello's career as a minor troubadour, yet deliberately omits any references to the career as a soldier that would imply a sense of duty and patriotism his Sordello is represented as being incapable of acting upon. Sordello is characterized by Browning as a mystical, introspective poet-figure, more interested in writing self-conscious love lyrics than in writing about or participating in the thirteenth-century conflict between the Guelfs who supported the Papacy and the Ghibellins who supported the State.

Of more immediate significance is Browning's altering of the details surrounding the historical Sordello's romantic escapades as a courtly lover who ran off with a married woman of dubious virtue. Browning retains in his Sordello the implied streak of physicality, yet adds to this an equally strong streak of idealism: the resulting dualism, and the difficulties it causes in Sordello's relationship
with Palma, indicates Browning's interest in the extremes found in medieval and Italian Renaissance conventions of secular love.

Browning's characterization of Palma, historically named Cunizza, involves an even more liberal treatment of facts, and indicates his desire to create a character who was as unhistorical as she was unconventional. The reader's attention is drawn to this manipulation of source material in Book V:

Strange that three such confessions so should hap
To Palma Dante spoke with in the clear
Amorous silence of the Swooning-sphere.
Cunizza, as he called her!

(V. 979-982)

The historical Palma was Cunizza's half-sister, yet Browning seems to have been interested mainly in the symbolic suggestions of her name. Browning's Palma is a touchstone in Sordello, and her response to secular love is repeatedly contrasted with that of Sordello to offset his extremism, and to suggest a more sustaining alternative. The narrator, who increasingly places secular love in a humanistic context, towards the end of his story uses biblical images and images from Church history to describe her; her symbolic affinities with palm trees and Palm Sunday, with churches and with madonna figures, are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. It is sufficient to point out here that history has been altered for the purpose of creating in Palma an admirable character with concrete and applicable rather than abstractedly idealized virtues who, despite these, is incapable of "swaying all Sordello" (VI. 92), or of becoming the moon to "match his Sea" (VI. 94). Browning's justification of her apparent failure and his sympathetic yet skeptical portrayal of Sordello indicate a hopeful
and creative response to human nature, history, and the potential of "Love meet for such a Strength" (VI. 93).

The differing responses of Sordello and Palma to secular love are initiated during the reader's introduction to the lovers, and are sustained throughout the poem by the use of contrasting patterns of imagery and responses to the conventions of secular love. In the dramatic scene which gives readers our first impression of the lovers, the narrator draws upon several conventional medieval and Renaissance images in his selective description of what at first glance appears to be illicit lovers reacting to the intruding light of dawn:

\[
\text{does that one man sleep whose brow} \\
\text{The dying lamp-flame sinks and rises o'er?} \\
\text{What woman stood beside him? not the more} \\
\text{Is he unfastened from the earnest eyes} \\
\text{Because that arras fell between! Her wise} \\
\text{And lulling words are yet about the room,} \\
\text{Her presence wholly poured upon the gloom} \\
\text{Down even to her vesture's creeping stir:} \\
\text{And so reclines he, saturate with her,} \\
\text{Until an outcry from the square beneath} \\
\text{Pierces the charm: he springs up, glad to breathe} \\
\text{Above the cunning element, and shakes} \\
\text{The stupor off as (look you) morning breaks} \\
\text{On the gay dress, and, near concealed by it,} \\
\text{The lean frame like a half-burnt taper, lit} \\
\text{Erst at some marriage-feast, then laid away} \\
\text{Till the Armenian bridegroom's dying-day,} \\
\text{In his wool wedding-robe.} \\
\text{(I. 334-351)}
\]

We are invited to consider several possibilities regarding this relationship, to ask "What woman," and in what way the "one man" is "saturate with her." The secretive, mysterious atmosphere of the dawn awakening is a stock dramatic-setting in medieval and Renaissance literature dealing with the theme of illicit liaisons, and the simile which compares Sordello's body to a "half-burnt taper" has equally
conventional sexual implications. Donne, for example, uses this very common image in "The Canonization": "We are tapers too, and at our own cost die." The intended effect of this image traditionally is a sense of paradox: the lovers are willing to sacrifice their lives for the glory of physical love which will guide them to a kind of deification. Such conventions, with their suggestions of a burning eroticism and martyrdom, are shared by courtly and Petrarchan love literature, and prompt the reader to think of Palma and Sordello in these terms. But while Sordello fulfills our expectations of a suitably sluggish lover who "reclines" then "shakes/ The stupor off," the woman with whom he is "saturate" does not, and suggests to the reader the possibilities of a relationship which is more or other than just physical. It is the woman who breaks the bonds of literary convention, and who refuses to conform to the expectations of Sordello or the reader. Our initial concept of Sordello as a physical, perhaps sensual man, is determined by descriptions of his torpid body. Palma, on the other hand, is defined in terms of her "earnest eyes," her "presence," her "wise/ And lulling words," creating a very different physical impression from that of the sensual Sordello. Juxtapositions of Sordello's body with Palma's words, the "dying lamp-flame" with the break of dawn, and the "dying-day" of the Armenian bridegroom with the "marriage feast" create unresolved tensions and paradoxes between the conventions of sensual love and elements which supersede mere sensualism. We are left to wonder about the precise nature of this relationship since we are provided only with visual images, and not with a conventional dialogue or aubade. The passage is intended to create impressions of the roles of the lovers in the relationship; the fact that Palma stands while Sordello
"reclines" implies that she is the dominant force, yet her "earnest eyes" indicate to the reader that she is not the tyrannical, tormenting female typical of medieval and Renaissance complaint poems.

Once Browning has introduced his readers to the lovers he creates a series of flashbacks through which we achieve a fuller understanding of what it is in their past experiences that motivates Sordello and Palma to act as they do in their love relationship. We learn that while Sordello's imagination has been nurtured by aesthetic fantasies at the isolated Goito castle, a setting reminiscent of places such as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and Tennyson's "Palace of Art," Palma's has been fed more sparingly by the realities and demands of her family's political aspirations.

Our intimations of Sordello as a sensual lover are deepened and viewed from a different perspective in the narrator's subsequent description of the architecture and sculpture which, it turns out, have profoundly shaped Sordello's response to secular love. A carefully contrived dramatic setting again plays a significant role in heightening the reader's expectations: the narrator guides us through "corridors contrived for sin" (I. 396), seducing our imaginations with his suggestive description of the type of bacchanalian Renaissance architecture used by Pugin and Ruskin to evidence the moral decline of that era:

The roof, each kissing top entwined with top, Leaning together; in the carver's mind Some knot of bacchanalis, flushed cheek combined With straining forehead, shoulders purpled, hair Diffused between.

(I. 406-410)
It appears, then, that Browning is as aware of the paganism reflected in some Italian Renaissance architecture as are Pugin and Ruskin. But there are some anomalies to be considered which suggest on Browning's part a willingness to view the processes of history in their complexity rather than to eliminate components not in accordance with preconceived patterns. For example, the bacchanalian elements of this thirteenth-century architecture indicate the presence of a classical influence Victorians tended to equate with fifteenth-century decadence. These same Victorians also believed the fifteenth century to be radically differentiated from the Middle Ages by its revival of interest in classicism; Browning's familiarity with Italian Renaissance architecture enables him to show continuities between the medieval and Renaissance periods which in this instance are demonstrated by a shared classicism. The implications broaden as one considers that the medieval period was not as dark in terms of being unaware of or unresponsive to the classical tradition as some Victorians tended to think; nor was the medieval period as untainted by paganism as admirers such as Pugin wanted it to be. Browning's bacchanalian architecture ensures the recognition of the erotic strain of classicism and medievalism which Victorian Hellenists and medievalists tended to overlook in their pursuit of a paradisal culture embodying the ideals of sweetness and light. It is clear that Browning in the 1830's was dealing objectively with these tensions between Bacchanalian and Apollonian impulses, while Victorians such as Ruskin and Arnold were stressing the predominance of one over the other well into the 1870's. In Sordello, for example, the protagonist vacillates between the extremes of Bacchanalian and Appolonian impulses in his attitudes.
towards secular love, religious experience, and the function of poetry, thus demonstrating the paradoxes associated with the Renaissance. Browning delineates the tensions between these extremes in even more detail and complexity in The Ring and the Book, for example, through the contrasting responses of "Half-Rome" and "The Other Half-Rome" to the Roman murder story. Even in Sordello Browning's grasp of the mainstreams of these wide-ranging tensions is appreciable, most strikingly so in the narrator's description of the font-tomb which the youthful Sordello visits nightly, and which influences his response to secular love as either redeemingly spiritual or punishingly erotic. One cannot over-estimate the symbolic import of this font-tomb which embodies in sculpture the Renaissance tensions and paradoxes which have engendered Sordello's dualisms. The sculpture consists of a group of achingly beautiful Caryatides who simultaneously celebrate and are punished for the sinful eroticism for which they have been enshrined in marble; these paradoxical impulses inspire in Sordello an Apollonian religious devotion which is suffused with a sublimated eroticism:

A dullish grey-streaked cumbrous font, a group
Round it, each side of it, where'er one sees,
Upholds it--shrinking Caryatides
Of just-tinged marble like Eve's limied flesh
Benêath her Maker's finger when the fresh
First pulse of life shot brightening the snow:
The font's edge burthens every shoulder, so
They muse upon the ground, eyelids half closed,
Some, with meek arms behind their backs disposed,
Some, crossed above their bosoms, some, to veil
Their eyes, some, propping chin and cheek so pale,
Some, hanging slack an utter helpless length
Dead as a buried vestal whose whole strength
Goes when the grate above shuts heavily;
So dwell these noiseless girls, patient to see,
Like priestesses because of sin impure
Penanced for ever, who resigned endure,
Having that once drunk sweetness to the dregs;
And every eve Sordello's visit begs
Pardon for them: constant as eve he came
To sit beside each in her turn, the same
As one of them, a certain space: and awe
Made a great indistinctness till he saw
Sunset slant cheerful through the buttress chinks,
Gold seven times globed; surely our maiden shrinks
And a smile stirs her as if one faint grain
Her load were lightened, one shade less the stain
Obscured her forehead, yet one more bead slipt
From off the rosary whereby the crypt
Keeps count of the contritions of its charge?
Then with a step more light, a heart more large,
He may depart, leave her and every one
To linger out the penance in mute stone.

(I. 416-448)

Few passages in Sordello are as illustrative of Browning's awareness of
the complex Italian Renaissance tensions reflected in its sculpture
between erotic, spiritual, and aesthetic inclinations. The sculpture
which captivates Sordello's youthful imagination is, first of all, a
font-tomb, imaging the aesthetic yoking together of symbols of life and
death that initiates the atmosphere of paradox and tension for which
the passage is remarkable. The font-tomb's simultaneous eroticism and
aestheticism, its idealization of a beauty which transcends death, and
its enshrinement of erotic yet forbidden beauty, reflect paradoxes
Browning sees as being typical of the Italian Renaissance; these same
paradoxes also imply and anticipate the nature of Sordello's relations
with Palma.

The disquieting tension in the passage is achieved through its
forced rather than natural relationships between seemingly unrelated
entities such as classicism and Christianity, for example, in the
comparison of the marmoreal Caryatides to "Eve's lilied flesh," and in
allusions to buried vestals and rosary beads. Sordello, in a
priest-like fashion, visits the Caryatides daily to relieve the "sin impure" of those who "once drunk sweetness to the dregs." The piety of his actions, however, must be viewed in relation to the eroticism generated in the passage by the sensuous texture of its sounds, rhythms and imagery as it describes the "flesh" of the delicate priestesses, their "bosoms," their "meek arms," and their "eyelids half closed."

Browning achieves a whispering, incantational quality in the language of rhymes such as 416-420 of the quoted passage by emphasizing the soft "sh," "ous," "ing," and "r" sounds, and with the alliterative effects of the combinations of "f's," "l's," and "r's": "like Eve's lilied flesh/ Beneath her Maker's finger when the fresh/ First pulse of life shot brightening the snow. . . ." The reader thus experiences the allure of a sensuousness which in the mind of the sculptors of the font-tomb earns penance for ever."

This sculpture exerts a powerful influence on the sensitive and impressionable Sordello who worships the exquisite beauty of the pagan priestesses, and who engages in a penance he imagines will lessen the "stain" of their impurity. His erotic impulses are sublimated into channels of religious devotion which both explain and illustrate his subsequent tendency to separate physical from spiritual inclinations in his responses to secular love, religion, and the function of poetry.

Alan P. Johnson is one of a few critics who are sensitive to the contradictions embodied in the font-tomb, yet he seems unaware of their larger implications. Johnson realizes that along with its "sensuous beauty" the font-tomb expresses a "moral condemnation of that beauty."

In Sordello's mind the fault which the Caryatides emphasize with their eternal labor is clearly a breach of chastity. They are sinning vestal priestesses condemned to the punishment of the Carian women as
well as to burial."\textsuperscript{13} Johnson, however, remains insensitive to the paradoxical tensions transferred from the sculpture to Sordello's imagination which lead him in his relationship with Palma to vacillate between physical desire and the sublimation of that desire; instead, Johnson argues that "Sordello justifies the classical sensuousness to himself and resolves to justify it to its northern, and perhaps its southern critics."\textsuperscript{14} Sordello, then, is described as having a sensuous, classical temperament which one would expect to be manifested during his relationship with Palma. Johnson would have a great deal of difficulty explaining Sordello's inclination towards a transcendentalized relationship with a much etherealized Palma.

Sordello's nightly penances by the font-tomb develop a significant background of ideas and symbols which heighten our understanding of his relationship with Palma, and of his function as an everyman of the Italian Renaissance. The description of the font-tomb highlights the excessiveness of certain Renaissance processes, particularly the tension between physicality and asceticism. Sordello's youthful fantasies are the first of several situations in which he indulges in a cloistered religio-aesthetic experience; the transference of his ideals and emotions from the fantastical Caryatides to the realities of Palma's situation and expectations is understandably very difficult for Sordello.

Part of his difficulty is caused by the withdrawn, cloistered environment "in his drowsy Paradise" (I. 636) at Goyo which leads him to expect his experiences of secular love, religion, and art to be similarly cloistered. His fantasies are a substitute for experience, and his vigils by the font-tomb lead him to believe that it is an
artful representation of what women, religion and art should be like. Isobel Armstrong inadvertently illustrates the clash between fantasy and experience in her discussion of the Eve simile in the font-tomb passage: "In the last biblical simile, not content with a conventional image, Browning galvanises the usual comparison by turning it upside down. Flesh is usually compared with marble, not marble with flesh, lilies and snow!" This galvanising of the comparison of marble to flesh should be attributed not just to Browning, but also to Sordello, and hence to the Italian Renaissance. An aesthetic which prefers the perfections of art to the imperfections of flesh or nature is common in Browning's Italian Renaissance poems, and is something he sees as typical of the Italian Renaissance. The Duke of Ferrara, for example, admires more his "last Duchess painted on the wall,/ Looking as if she were alive" (ll. 1-2) than when she actually lived. Similarly, the libertine bishop ordering his tomb wants it decorated with lapis lazuli which is "Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast" (l. 44). For the isolated and inexperienced Sordello, flesh is subordinate to the perfections of marble which he subsequently expects flesh to resemble. This tendency is made abundantly clear when his fantasies are transferred from the sculptured Caryatides to Palma:

so conspicuous in his world
Of dreams sate Palma. How the tresses curled
Into a sumptuous swell of gold and wound
About her like a glory, even the ground
Was bright as with shed sunbeams; (breathe not, breathe
Not)--poised, see, one leg doubled underneath,
Its small foot buried in the dimpling snow,
Rests, but the other, listlessly below,
O'er the couch-side swings feeling for cool air,
The vein-streaks swoon in a richer violet where
The languid blood lies heavily; and calm
On her slight prop, each flat and outspread palm,
As but, suspended in the act to rise
By consciousness of beauty, whence her eyes
Turn with so frank a triumph, for she meets
Apollo’s gaze in the pine-glooms.

(I. 973-988)

The dualities apparent in Sordello’s response to the Caryatids are reproduced in this vision of Palma which draws upon many of the paradoxes found in medieval and Renaissance representations of women. On the one hand Sordello uses images from the classical, courtly love and Petrarchist traditions to describe a pedestalled virginal goddess, but he simultaneously reveals undercurrents of libertine sensuality. A great deal of tension is generated in the passage by Sordello’s ambivalent inclinations which are underlined by the evolution of images from Petrarchan "sunbeams" to more sensuous "vein-streaks swoln." Petrarchan images of gold and light are used to describe a woman of unearthly physical beauty: her "tresses" are a "sumptuous swell of gold" which wind "About her like a glory," an angelic effect sustained by the "shed sunbeams" on the "bright" ground. In accordance with her unearthliness Sordello demands that she "breath not,/ Not:" she is to remain like a statue, "poised," "languid," "As but suspended." The image of flesh as "dimpling snow" best captures the essence of a woman enshrined in marble; Apollo’s Daphne must remain eternally desirable yet unattainable.

Juxtaposed with Sordello’s worship of the pedestalled goddesses of classical and religious iconography is an undercurrent of sensuality which can be traced through the gradation of light and colour imagery from "sunbeams" to "snow," from "vein-streaks swoln a richer violet" to the "pine glooms" of the forest. Elissa Schagrin Guralnick evaluates Browning’s use of light-imagery in this passage in an argument which is
weakened by her tendency to be too selective in her choice of quotations. She uses this passage to argue that Palma is "sunlike in appearance" and therefore inspires Sordello's enlightened perceptions, and has no sense of the modulation of images from "sunbeams" to "pine glooms," or of the implied dualistic nature of Sordello's vision of Palma. Sordello's sensual, libertine inclinations are evident in his image of a seductively reclining Palma whose foot "swings feeling for cool air" and whose "languid blood lies heavily." The image of "vein-streaks swolin a richer violet" invites comparison with the sensualist-aesthete Bishop's description of the stone which is "Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast." The publication of the latter poem in 1845 underlines Browning's sustained interest in the Italian Renaissance and its reputation for worldliness and sensual decadence. Similarities between Sordello and the decadent Bishop heighten our sense of Browning's questioning of their kind of response to human relations, religion and art, although Sordello's idealism engages a sympathy and understanding from the reader which we never extend to the thoroughly repugnant Bishop. The Bishop's worldliness illustrates what Browning sees as aberrant tendencies of the Italian Renaissance, but it is essential to recognize that Browning provides the alternative responses of the skeptical auditors and of the biblical and religious figures alluded to in the poem; these men, contemporary and historical, are representative of more sustaining Renaissance processes which offset the extreme and aberrant behaviour of men such as the Bishop.

Similar alternatives are provided in Sordello, through the changing responses of Sordello and the narrator, and through Palma's response to Sordello, the paradigm of Renaissance extremism. His
extreme response to human love is demonstrated through his affinities with the conventions of courtly love and Renaissance Petrarchism as he vacillates between Neoplatonic idealism and libertine sensuality. With Palma, he submits himself to an idealized female figure whose gaze triumphs over him. His libertinism, however, is underlined several times throughout the poem when he describes himself as a Renaissance courtier, asking, for example,

shall I assume
--My foot the courtly gait, my tongue the trope,
My eye the glance, before the doors fly ope
One moment? What—with guardsers row on row,
Gay swarms of varletry that come and go,
Pages to dice with, waiting girls unlace
The plackets off.

(V. 399-405)

Sordello’s physicality is reserved for "waiting girls," yet shows itself in relation to Palma during his revées.

In true courtly love fashion he imagines himself to be in love with Palma before they meet, and fantasizes rather uncannily that he will "take her" (II. 19) during "tō-day’s adventure" (II. 14) when she will "emerge/ Flushed, now, and panting" (II. 34-35) from the forest. Medieval diction and conventions of courtly love are aligned with reminiscences of the forest pursuits and conquests of classical nymphs and goddesses, all of which contribute to the reader’s sense of Sordello’s physicality, and of the physicality embodied in the classical, medieval, and Petrarchist traditions. His "adventure" at the Mantuan court of love and winning of the poetry tournament, however, remind us once again of Sordello’s ambivalent responses to physicality. He is awarded Palma’s scarf for his defeat of the poet Eglamor, and swoons into a "luscious trance" (II. 132) at her touch:
One sight withheld him; there sat Adelaide,
Silent; but at her knees the very maid
Of the North Chamber, her lips as rich,
The same pure fleecy hair; one curl of which,
Golden and great, quite touched his cheek as o'er
She leant, speaking some six words and no more;
He answered something, anything; and she
Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily
Upon him, her neck's warmth and all; again
Moved the arrested magic; in his brain
Noises grew, and a light that turned to glare,
And greater glare, until the intense flare
Engulfed him, shut the whole scene from his sense,
(II. 100-112)

The imagery of the passage draws upon conventions of courtsy love and Petrarchism, particularly regarding the idealized female and the subjugate male; the "maid/ Of the North Chamber" has "Golden" hair which, when it "touched his cheek," contributes to a magical, mystical trance of an "intense glare" of light. The development of a sequence of images from the physical to the mystical, from the "neck's warmth" of the scarf to the "intense flare," reverses the direction of the earlier sequence of images in Sordello's vision of Palma, emphasizing the transcendental, Neoplatonic inclinations of Sordello when the actual Palma replaces the imagined. He is in a kind of ecstasy, one that combines elements of sensuousness and Neoplatonic ascent to "shut the whole scene from his sense;" a "luscious trance" is Sordello's reaction to the experience of secular love. Sordello responds to love, religion and art in a similar way: they are used to induce reveries of inaction, to separate Sordello from the world's realities, and to turn Sordello inward on himself.

Palma, in contrast, responds very differently: love, religion and poetry are used by her in attempts to fulfill the Ghibellin political goal of resisting Guelf dominance. While Sordello's isolated youth
in the aesthetic environment at Goito castle has resulted in a tendency towards abstract reveries and the pursuit of otherworldly ideals, Palma's participation in politics has cultivated a sense of duty and the need for pragmatic action. Her descriptions of her past do not include anything like Sordello's aesthetic musings and they reproduce a history of the political intrigue with which she now plans to involve Sordello. Palma recounts and summarizes conversations she has heard in her past as she tells her story to Sordello:

Palma was the link,
As Agnes' child, between us, and they shrink
From losing Palma: judge if we advance
Your father's method your inheritance!
That day she was betrothed to Boniface
At Padua by Taurello's self, took place
The outrage of the Ferrarese: again,
That day she sought Verona with the train
Agreed for, by Taurello's policy
Convicting Richard of the fault

And now
What glory may engird Sordello's brow
For this?

(III. 501-516)

While Sordello's libertine-aestheticism illustrates one extreme associated with the Renaissance, Palma's involvement in the politics of the period illustrates another extreme. The rise of the Italian city states and their Machiavellian proponents, and the civil war between Guelfs and Ghibellins, mark violent historical realities which those who idealize the Renaissance do not often take into account. Palma's willingness to act as a political "link" is shown in her immediate evolvement of a course of action for herself and Sordello, stated with a confidence and conviction that contrast with Sordello's swaying will and "accustomed fault of breaking yoke" (V. 322):
I stand, Romano; in their stead
Assume the station they desert, and give
Still, as the Kaiser's Representative,
Taurello licence he demands. Midnight—
Morning—by noon tomorrow, making light
Of the Leagues issue, we, in some gay weed
Like yours disguised together, mayprecede
The arbitrators to Ferrara; reach
Him, let Taurello's noble accents teach
The rest! then say if I have misconceived
Your destiny, too readily believed
The Kaiser's cause your own.

(III. 539-550)

Palma's plan is carried out: the two of them reach Ferrara and Sordello attempts to persuade Salinguerra, through the medium of poetry, to support the Guelf cause, marking his first attempt to use poetry for the benefit of others rather than for self-aggrandizement. It is this gesture which redeems Sordello in the eyes of the reader, and which is the harvest of his relationship with Palma. Sordello is responding to Palma's philosophy of an "out-soul" which she explains to him in a passage central to the poem's representation of the potential of secular love to ennoble mankind. In the passage Sordello is told by Palma about her quest for the "out-soul" she was destined to love, and found in him; the difference between their youthful ideals and expectations is striking:

In dream was Palma wholly subjected
To some out-soul which dawned not though she pined;
Delaying still (pursued she) heart and mind
To live: how dared I let expand the force
Within me till some out-soul whose resource
It grew for should direct it? Every law
Of life, its fitness and every flaw,
Must that determine whose corporeal shape
Would be no other than the prime escape
And revelation to me of a Will
Orb-like obscured and inscrutable
Above except the point I was to know
Shone that myself, my powers, might overflow
So far, so much; as now it signified
Which earthly shape it henceforth chose to guide
Me by, whose lip selected to declare
Its oracles, what fleshly garb would wear:
--The first of intimations, whom to love;
The next, how love him.

(III. 313-331)

The passage is remarkable for its subtle redirection of ideas
and images used in Sordello's descriptions of Palma, thereby suggest-
ing their contrasting views without undermining their mutual devotion.
Her differing application of Neoplatonic conventions offsets the
extremes found in Sordello's Petrarchism, and suggests Browning's
affirmation of particular aspects of Neoplatonism. Unlike Sordello,
Palma is neither sensual nor transcendental, and does not separate the
body from the soul, the physical from the spiritual aspects of love.
Her concept of an "out-soul" might suggest a disembodied transcendental
union of spirits, but her images accretively gain the human and physi-
cal proportions of an "earthly shape" and "fleshly garb": she affirms
the human body in a way which bears no trace of Sordello's sensuality.
It should be noted, however, that Palma does not merely reverse
Sordello's transcendental, ecstatic experience, since her emphasis is
on a blending of physical and spiritual qualities rather than a move-
ment away from or towards one or the other.

She also blends Neoplatonic and Christian ideas and images in
her discussion of a "Will" which will guide her towards the "corporeal
shape" she is destined to love. Palma's description of this "Will" as
"Orb-like" and shining draws upon Neoplatonic images of spheres and
light, but the images are used without the conventional idea of ascend-
ing beyond and separating from the body. Sordello's ecstatic trance
was catalysed by a blinding light of "glare" and "flare" which "shut
the whole scene from his sense"; Palma's "Will" enlightens: it "Shone" to tell her "Whom to love;"/ "The next, how love him." The question "how love him" indicates her belief in the Christian exhortation to do good unto others out of "love," and crystallizes the essential difference between Sordello's self-oriented reverie and Palma's need and desire to serve another.

The differing responses of Palma and Sordello to the conventions of thirteenth-century love are further clarified by their respective love poems. Palma's affirmative and creative response to what is corporeal and earthly reflects an Ovidian and biblical vitality which calls to mind the Song of Solomon:

> waits he not the waking year?  
> His almond blossoms must be honey-ripe  
> By this, to welcome him fresh runnels stripe  
> The thawed ravines; because of him the wind  
> Walks like a herald. I shall surely find  
> Him now!  

(III. 341-346)

She uses celebratory images of spring to describe her sense of imminent fulfillment and joy, and her images and metaphors reflect an energized vitality which Sordello's do not achieve. Vigorous rhythmic patterns underline her response to the processes of nature, particularly the awakening of spring, and contrast sharply with Sordello's tepid representation of female perfection in the "Goito lay" which becomes his legacy:

> "Her head that's sharp and perfect like a pear,  
> So close and smooth are laid the few fine locks  
> Coloured like honey oozed from the topmost rocks  
> Sun-blanch'd the livelong summer. . . ."

(II. 156-159)
Sordello's love poem is a very conventional description of the perfect beauty of an idealized woman which reflects little of the vitality of Palma's response to nature and love. His similes are unimaginative, his alliteration flat, his images hackneyed, yet it is Sordello's love poem which captures the thirteenth-century Italian imagination. Palma is the anomaly; Sordello is the thirteenth-century Italian norm.

The differing responses of Palma and Sordello to secular love culminate in their sense of the relatedness of their love relationship to the rest of human experience. Palma is disinclined to use their relationship as an excuse to withdraw into a cloistered, spiritual union unrelated to other human concerns. Sordello's ecstatic trance is inwardly directed and experienced only by himself, but Palma is always concerned with what lies beyond the self, the well-being and fulfillment of her "out-soul." She wants "to serve him--to be served," imagining a reciprocal relationship which is mutually sustaining and fulfilling. It is significant that her "powers," beyond their purpose of uniting with an "out-soul," are to be used to express her will through action, a concept Earl Hilton believes to be central to Browning's philosophy: "In Palma, who found her 'star'--another equivalent of "moon" or "out-soul" as symbol for that something outside oneself which Browning held necessary for a purposeful life--in her love for Sordello, we find one solution to the problem of a central aim as a source of will and actions." Hilton is wise to maintain an open-ended interpretation, as does Palma, of "that something outside oneself" in discussing her concept of an "out-soul," since it is intended to include all aspects of human endeavour, including the spheres of human love, religious experience and aesthetic theory. The essence of the concept of an
"out-soul" is that human potential is best fulfilled through dedication to, and in a reciprocal relationship with, something beyond the self. Palma places her need and desire for an "out-soul" in a religious context which relates human love to divine ordination. For Palma, secular love provides the "revelation" of a "Will" which is "inscrutable" except at "the point" which merges her powers with those of an "out-soul." Human love, then, provides the catalyst for her perceptions of a divine "Will" which ordains that humans should love one another. The significance of Palma's conceptions of an "out-soul," human love and the nature of God is made clear in a passage to be discussed in the chapter on religious experience, in which the narrator echoes, rephrases and expands Palma's thirteenth-century intuitions, illustrating his developing understanding of the ways of God to men (VI. 592-605). The essence of his insight is that God has provided a humanly divine "out-soul," and that it is Sordello's lack of faith in such a possibility that underlines his lack of fulfillment.

Palma tries to persuade Sordello that the Ghibellin cause is a type of "out-soul," and that together they can contribute to the well-being of the "multitude." Readers are left to imagine, since we are not told directly, what she must have thought and felt when Sordello began espousing the Guelf rather than the Ghibellin cause. The implication is that she is not the type of person who would force her views on Sordello, preferring, instead, to use persuasion, to allow him to choose freely, and to support him in his choice. When these political tensions enter their relationship the images and conventions of romantic love are no longer employed in descriptions of the lovers and their activities; ideals are replaced by the realities of opposing wills and
needs:

By heap the watch-fires moulder'd, and beside
The blackest spoke Sordello and replied
Palma with none to listen. 'Tis your Cause--
What makes a Ghibellin? There should be laws--
(Remember how my youth escaped! I trust
To you for manhood, Palma; tell me just
As any child). . . .

(IV. 883-889)

Palma replies "who, none to listen," and is now viewed by Sordello as
a mother-teacher figure. Her supportive and protective gestures are
emphasized during the denouement in Book V when Salinguerra and Sor-
dello learn that they are father and son, and when Salinguerra makes
Sordello "Romano's Head":

Palma had listened patiently: but when
'Twas time expostulate, attempt withdraw
Taurello from his child, she, without awe
Took off his iron arms from, one by one,
Sordello's shrinking shoulders, and, that done,
Made him avert his visage and relieve
Sordello (you might see his corset heave
The while) who, loose, rose--tried to speak--then
They left him in the chamber--all was blank.

(V. 867-875)

The passage underlines her patience, strength and compassion: her
plans have failed, yet rather than lash out in anger (as does Salin-
guerra, Book V. 846-869), she tries to comfort both men. Her strength
is demonstrated when Salinguerra, imaged elsewhere as a preying osprey,
obey's her bidding; her compassion is shown in her desire to "relieve"
the pain of the emotionally shattered Sordello. Tragic reality has
invaded the ideals of conventional medieval and Renaissance love; it
strengthens Palma, whose ideals had already been tempered by experience;
it destroys Sordello, whose ideals were too divorced from reality to cope with it, despite the support of his "out-soul" Palma.

Through the various human failures illustrated in Sordello--of Sordello, Salinguerra, and Palma to realize their ideals and ambitions, and of conventional secular love to be in itself the apex of human existence--one can see the youthful Browning testing conventional idealism against the tensions and disappointments of experience. Sordello tragically expires, overwhelmed by the drama of choice and responsibility; Salinguerra retracts into his cynical libertinism, inflicting further suffering on the heroine Palma:

--he sucking in each phrase
As if an angel spoke: the foolish praise
Ended, he drew her on his mailed knees, made
Her face a frame-work with his hands, a shade,
A crown, an aureole--there must she remain
(Her little mouth compressed with smiling pain
As in his gloves she felt her tresses twitch)
To get the best look at, in fittest niche
Dispose his saint; that done, he kissed her brow.

(V. 900-908)

The passage warrants attention because it shows Taurello's cruel and libertine aestheticism, and a tendency Browning sees in the Italian Renaissance to cloak sensuality with images of angels and saints. The convention of comparing a woman to a saint is combined here with Salinguerra's sensual physical movements, a combination which creates a forced and discomfiting relationship: the "saint" Palma, is drawn onto "mailed knees" as Salinguerra makes an "aureole" with hands that "twitch" her hair despite her "smiling pain," then kisses "her brow."

This kind of physicality is the reverse of the kind implied by Palma's "out-soul" passage (III. 313-331) and poem (III. 341-346) which affirm
the "earthly shape," "fleshly garb," and natural processes in relationships harmonized by principles of love and service. 23

Sordello's characters tend to respond to Palma in terms of the extremes of idealism and libertinism illustrated by Salinguerra and Sordello, extremes Palma tries to resist. The narrator, too, initially responds to her as "that golden Palma" (III. 586), a response which changes during the process of creating his poem and her character. In a passage used to preface the digression in Sordello to nineteenth-century Venice in which he discusses his changed response to feminine muses and poetry, he asks readers to "thank/Verona's Lady" (III. 586-587) for Palma's meliorating effect on Sordello; his image links her to a Catholic Church in Venice and its statue of the Madonna. The narrator's discussion of Palma leads to his association of her with muses and with poetry, and the common denominator of these comparisons is that Palma, muses, and poetry should be used to affirm and reflect life's processes rather than to encourage people to turn from the world in search of a visionary refuge into which they should escape. In an intriguing and enigmatic passage readers are asked not to underestimate the poet's rhymes, and not to equate them with ephemeral rhymes that "Dispart, disperse.../Like an escape of angels." 24 The images of the passage suggest that more is being discussed than the subject of poetry, and that the universal tendency to idealize women into abstract, rarefied creatures parallels a similar tendency to idealize poetry and the women in poetry.

Nor slight too much my rhymes—"that spring, disspread, Dispart, disperse, lingering overhead Like an escape of angels?" Rather say My transcendental platan! mounting gay
(An archimage so courts a novice queen)
With tremulous silvered trunk, whence branches sheen
Laugh out, thick foliaged next, a-shiver soon
With colored buds, then glowing like the moon.
One mild flame, last a pause, a burst, and all
Her ivory limbs are smothered by a fall
Bloom flinders and fruit sparkles and leaf dust
Ending the weird work prosecuted.

(III, 598-609)

Vibrant physical imagery is used to describe the creation of poetry
likened to a "transcendental platan" said to be different from poetry
which is comparable to an "escape of angels." Substituted for the
latter are concrete, vigorous images which characterize poetry as a
branching, budding tree, the life cycle of which culminates in "bloom
flinders and fruit sparkles." This richly descriptive passage uses the
platan tree as a symbol for the kind of poetry the narrator wants to
write—a poetry which mimetically represents and celebrates life cycles
and the process of creation, healthily rooted in the earth while growing
towards the sky.

The passage is further detailed with allusions to the Archimago
and "novice queen" of Spenser's Faerie Queen. Spenser's Archimago
uses images from the erotic courtly love tradition to seduce Una and
the Red Cross Knight, and Una withstands the temptations because her
faith in God and the Knight is stronger than the Knight's. The thematic
relationships between poetry, Palma, Sordello, Archimago, Una and the
Red Cross Knight are provocatively suggestive, yet, finally, difficult
to pin down in other than general terms even though Palma, like Una,
demonstrates a strength her betrothed does not. What is clear, however,
is the tension described by the narrator between the tendency to equate
women such as Palma, and poetry, with "angels," and the concrete alter-
native represented by the fecundity of the process of creation.
symbolized by the description of the "transcendental platan"; the processes of Sordello underline the narrator's conversion to the latter philosophy which affirms, and places poetry in the context of, the dynamics of the natural world (this will be discussed fully in Chapter Four). The narrator becomes more concrete and lucid in his descriptions of Palma, the significance of poetry, and the significance of secular love in an important section of Book XI.

This turning point occurs when the narrator appears in nineteenth-century Venice, telling us that he is "at length/ Grown wise" (III. 718-719) as he underlines the difference between his naive expectations at home, and those shaped by Venice and the process of writing Sordello. The setting for the digression is carefully delineated as he sits amid the architectural ruins and ordinary humanity which contrast with the unfulfilled promises of the Italian Renaissance in history, and the naive ideals of his youth. He recognizes that Venice is not so much an image of a past historical perfection or abomination as "a type/ Of Life" (III. 721-722) which represents the concrete needs of humanity to which a poet should respond. This lengthy digression amplifies many of the poem's key themes and image patterns, including those associated with secular love, as the narrator seeks an inspirational woman or muse to whom he can dedicate his poem. In keeping with the gradual humanizing of his ideals we are told that rather than the pedestalled goddess he once "looked should foot Life's temple-floor" (III. 748), he chooses a poor Venetian waif, a "sad disheveled ghost" (III. 699):
You, no doubt,
Have the true knack of tiring suitors out
With those thin lips on tremble, lashless eyes
Inveterately tear-shot—there, be wise
Mistress of mine, there, there, as if I meant
You insult! Shall your friend (not slave) be shent
For speaking home? Besides care-bit erased
Broken-up beauties ever took my taste
Supremely, and I love you more, far more
Than she I looked should foot Life's temple-floor.

(III. 739-748)

Conventional images from the courtly and Petrarchist traditions are used with a sense of the irony achieved through their incongruent application to less than ideal beauty in less than ideal circumstances: the "ravishingest lady" (III. 761) he chooses as his "Mistress" reveals more about the need for and significance of secular love than could any ecstatic reverie, and he is her "friend" rather than her "slave" in an inversion of courtly love conventions. Of equal significance is his compassionate preference for "care-bit erased" Broken-up beauties over conventional idealized beauties. The narrator, then, modifies some conventions of love typified by medieval and Renaissance literature in accordance with the needs of his chosen audience—ordinary humanity.

The conventions have been shown in Sordello to place inhuman demands for perfection on a world which is imperfect, an imperfection the narrator learns to accept as being generative and affirmed by a loving, albeit demanding God. It is the recognition that secular love should radiate beyond the centre of romantic attraction to encompass the most demanding aspects of human experience, compassion, self-sacrifice, patience, and the affirmation of the created world, that enables the narrator to write Sordello, and to represent charitably and with hope the fallibility of Sordello and Palma. After this turning point in
Book III the narrator uses images from the Bible and from Renaissance English literature to characterize Palma, and images from the courtly love tradition are used with an increasing sense of irony. This pattern suggests Browning's consideration of the less extreme but equally prevailing aspects of the Renaissance represented by the tradition of English Christian humanism which strove to accommodate the contributions of classical, biblical and literary traditions. For example, consider the narrator's exoneration of Palma:

Never ask
Of Palma more! She saith, knowing her task
Was done, the labour of it—for success
Concerned not Palma, passion's votaress.

(V. 982-985)

Palma has sacrificed her own ambitions to further Sordello's, and her labors have in their own way been Herculean. The yoking together of "passion's" with the religious implications of "votaress" imply that Palma is being placed in a tradition of Christian heroes and heroines more concerned with the process of fulfilling their tasks than with a final "success." Suggested by these images is the exemplary Passion of Christ, with its pattern of suffering and self-sacrifice endured to show his love for mankind: along with this one should consider Browning's altering of the name Cunizza to Palma, a name suggestive of related images of the palms of hands and Palm Sunday (originally called Passion Sunday). It is not being claimed that Palma is a crucified Christ-figure: Browning creates such a figure obviously and dramatically in "Saul" in which the latter is imaged leaning against a tent-pole, "Both arms stretched out wide/ On the great cross-support in the center. . . ."

Rather, Palma's self-sacrificial behaviour and
willing acceptance of service are aligned with the similarly self-sacrificial behaviour of Christ and are therefore Christ-like. Subsequent images used by the narrator to describe Palma align her with biblical and literary figures who respond with intelligence, compassion, and dignity to difficult and painful experiences. We next see her mourning Sordello's death at the same font-tomb which was the source of his youthful fantasies, and which now entombs his body:

Goito's vines
Stand like a cheat detected--stark rough lines
The moon breaks through, a grey mean scale against
The vault where, this eve's Maiden, thou remain'st
Like some fresh martyr, eyes fixed--who can tell?
As Heaven, now all's at end, did not so well
Spite of the faith and victory, to leave
Its virgin quite to death in the lone eve.

(V. 1004-1011)

Images of Palma as a "martyr" and a "virgin" suggest affinities with exemplary biblical figures such as the bereaved Mary, Christ's virginal mother, who also mourned by a tomb. In addition, the play on words "now all's at end, did not so well" suggests some parallels between the characters of Palma and Shakespeare's Helena in All's Well That Ends Well: the play's heroine Helena uses wit and perseverance in her wooing of Bertram, qualities also demonstrated by Palma. The latter's "end," however, is "not so well" as that of Helena, who wins and marries Bertram in this comic representation of the travails of love.

Browning's Sordello is more tragic in its treatment of the potential of secular love, which is why his poem does not end with a marriage. The tragic end of the relationship between Sordello and Palma reflects Browning's careful evaluation of the conventions of courtly and Petrarchan love in which the nineteenth century was showing
a renewed interest, for example, in its historical romance literature. His skeptical response to the destructive patterns the conventions tend to issue in is offset by the character of Palma, who mediates between the dehumanizing extremes with her philosophy of an "out-soul," and with her faith in the power and divinity of self-sacrificial love: the implication is that even in thirteenth-century Italy, with its civil wars and Renaissance tensions, were people such as Palma who warrant equal recognition in revivals of interest in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and who offer alternatives to their extremes. The significance of Palma's "out-soul" philosophy, and of its meliorating effect on the poem's narrator, is demonstrated in Book VI in which he echoes and adapts her philosophy in accordance with his developing convictions about the significance of secular love in relation to divine love. The theme of divine love in relation to religious experience in Sordello is the subject of the following chapter.
Notes

1 Palma's neo-classical sense of fatalism is reflected in descriptions of the time spent waiting for Sordello, whose advent was predicted by astrology:

Exiled
Within Goito, still that dream beguiled
Her days and nights; 'twas found the orb she sought
To serve, those glimpses came of Fomalhaut
No other. . . .

(III. 426-430)

Fomalhaut is a star.

2 Browning's interest in the theme of secular love in his poetry is demonstrated in a letter "To Fanny Haworth," c. 1837-1838, Orr, Life and Letters, p. 97. He writes that he seeks "a subject of the most wild and passionate love, to contrast with the one I mean to have ready in a short time" and asks whether it should be the man or woman who feels this way. It is likely that it is Sordello which will be "ready in a short time."

3 This pattern is exemplified by Sordello, and will be evaluated in the text of the thesis. It is also exemplified by his father, Saltinguerra, who, after the death of Sordello's mother, Retrude, becomes a self-acclaimed Bacchus (IV. 730-836).


5 This line of thinking differs from Elissa Schagrin Guralnick's, who argues in favor of Palma's "essential likeness to Sordello" in "Archimagical Fireworks," p. 111, and who seems to have overlooked the carefully constructed contrasts in the poem which underline their differing rather than similar responses to secular love.

The good intentions implied by her "earnest eyes" are confirmed for the reader in Book III when the same scene is recalled through a repetition of the images of "A dying lamp flame" (III. 552) and "morn breaking" (III. 555). In the repeated description of the scene these images follow an extensive dramatic monologue of Palma's which underlines her devotion to Sordello and the Ghibellin cause, both of which are indicated in the following passage:

But when she felt she held her friend indeed
Safe, she threw back her curls, began implant
Her lessons; telling of another want
Goito's quiet nourished than his own.

(III. 305-308)

Mark D. Hawthorne discusses the function of the repetition of this scene in "Browning's Sordello: Structure Through Repetition," Victorian Poetry, 16 (1978), 204-216; hereafter cited as "Structure Through Repetition," and argues on p. 208 that its function is to separate "the expository flashback from the present condition." He also observes, on p. 209, that in the repeated scene "no such pejorative words as 'cunning' or 'stupor' occur." He does not, however, relate the changes in language to the narrator's desire in the first instance to highlight certain characteristics of Sordello, and in the second instance to highlight those of Palma. Hawthorne's basic argument is that Browning uses repetition to unify his poem.

Ruskin'sdamning opinion of neo-classical architecture during the Renaissance is a central theme in The Stones of Venice. He says in Works, XI, 227, that this architecture is "base, unnatural...and impious. Pagan in its origin, proud and unholy in its revival, paralyzed in its old age."

In Pugin's revised Preface to Contrasts, iii, he argues that "the real origin of both the revived Pagan and Protestant principles is to be traced to the decayed state of faith throughout Europe in the fifteenth century, which led men to admire and adopt the luxurious styles of ancient Paganism."

The variety and complexity of Bacchanalian and Apollonian impulses in The Ring and the Book are shown especially through the responses of the 10 speakers to Pompilia and Caponsacchi, the runaway wife and priest. In "Half-Rome," for example, a cynical libertinism casts Pompilia as the seductress of a cavalier Caponsacchi:

That, O Pompilia, thy sequestered eyes
Had noticed, straying o'er the prayerbook's edge,
More of the Canon than that black his coat,

And that, O Canon, thy religious care
Had breathed too soft a benedictite
To banish trouble from a lady's breast

That, O Pompilia, thy sequestered eyes
Had noticed, straying o'er the prayerbook's edge,
More of the Canon than that black his coat,

And that, O Canon, thy religious care
Had breathed too soft a benedictite
To banish trouble from a lady's breast
Had Caponsacchi flung the cassock far,
Doffed the priest, donned the perfect cavalier.

(II. 989-1000)

On the other hand, "Other-Half Rome" views Pompilia as an angelic "probationary soul" (III. 20), while Caponsacchi images her as a "wonderful white soul" (VI. 118) he, as Saint George, is destined to rescue.

11 The Caryatides were female statues serving as the columns of temples. It is thematically appropriate to Sordello that the name Caryatids was the name given to Artemis (patroness of unmarried girls and chastity) when she reported the death of Carya, a girl with whom Dionysus was in love. Browning's allusion to the Caryatides focuses on the tension between asceticism and physicality in classicism, and which Sordello is experiencing. Again, Browning seems to be representing continuities between the traditions of classicism (dismissed by many in the nineteenth century as paganism) and Christianity.

12 Isobel Armstrong in "Browning and the 'Grotesque' Style," in Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 93-123; hereafter cited as "the 'Grotesque' Style," comments on p. 100 on the "mysterious dimness and garish eroticism of the passage"; she notes on p. 101 that "morbid excess is the norm in the strained and violent heterogeneity of the diction and the imagery, oriental, classical and biblical." What she does not do is to relate the "morbid excess" to either its influence on Sordello's character, or to Browning's observation of the variety of "oriental, classical and biblical" influences in a century dismissed as dark by many in the nineteenth century.

Armstrong is elsewhere equally sensitive to the presence and significance of eroticism in Browning's poetry. In "Browning and Victorian Poetry of Sexual Love," in Writers: Robert Browning, p. 283, she argues convincingly that "Browning's love poetry is about the tragic solipsism and privacy of love, with its corollary in fantasy and morbid erotic feeling," an argument appropriate to, but not directed towards, Sordello's response to love.

13 Johnson, "The Pattern of Italian History," p. 328. Compare Johnson's sense of the tensions in the sculpture with Michael Mason's reference to "the ascetic vault at Goito" in "The Importance of Sordello," p. 126. With this, compare Elissa Schagrin Guralnick's exaltation of the "glorious Caryatides ... beautified even beyond their natural splendor," in "Archimagical Fireworks," p. 115. Each of these critics has noticed either the asceticism or the sensuousness of the sculpture, unlike Johnson and Armstrong, who identify the presence of both extremes.


17. This is one of several instances in which Sordello's physicality is emphasized. In Book III he imagines his choice to be between pleasure and renunciation. It is not clear whether he imagines or experiences the following:

Pushed thus into a drowsy copse,
Arms twine about my neck, each eyelid drops
Under a humid finger; while there flees
Outside the screen a pageant time repeats
Never again!

(III. 211-215)

Sordello is temporarily attracted to the philosophy of carpe diem popular in Renaissance love poetry.

18. Sordello's defeat of Eglamor results in the latter's death, and is a variation on the contest between Apollo and Marsyas. Browning thus alludes to a less favourable activity of Apollo, which tends to offset tendencies to idealize the Apollonian or Hellenic tradition. The parallel also causes us to view Sordello skeptically, and not to idealize the Renaissance processes represented by him.

19. In Sordello there are several accounts of violence and bloodshed, for example, in this description of the war-ravaged Ferrara:

Meantime Ferrara lay in rueful case;
The lady-city, for whose sole embrace
Her pair of suitors struggled, felt their arms
A brawny mischief to the fragile charms
Each tugged for--one discovering to twist
Her tresses twice or thrice about his wrist
Secured a point of vantage--one, how best
He'd parry that by planting in her breast
His elbow-spike--both parties too intent
For noticing, how'er the battle went,
Its conqueror would have a corpse to kiss.
May Boniface be duly damned for this!
Howled some old Ghibellin as up he turned,
From the wet heap of rubbish where they burned
His house, a little skull with dazzling teeth:

(IV. 1-15)

20. Michael Yetman, in "Exorcising Shelley," p. 90, points out that the "galvanizing effect of human love on Sordello's vision provides the first anti-solipsistic rallying point in his life...."

Browning creates a more sophisticated version of the libertine-aesthete in "Fra nipoti," published in 1855. The earthy monk is discovered "where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar" (1. 6) and adroitly constructs an argument to defend himself. Typically, the monk's description of the Prior's niece he features in his religious paintings involves a combination of religion and physicality: "The Prior's niece . . . patron saint" (1. 209)'s "a sweet angelic slip of a thing" (1. 370) who "puts out a soft palm . . . " (1. 371).

The situation of their dawn awakening with its sexual implications is described by the narrator from a very different perspective in Book III than it was in Book I, 334-351. The following excerpt is from Book III:

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

(III. 267-275)

There is an innocent and charming physicality to this description, which contrasts with the aura of sensuality (associated with Sordello) in Book I.

The reader's attention is focused on the significance of this passage by the use of repetition. The image of poetry as "lingering overhead/ like an escape of angels" is repeated from Book I, 906-908, in which it is used in a different context than in Book III. In Book I this type of poetry is advocated by Sordello and Eglamor who believe it should be oracular and divine. In Book III, however, the narrator argues that such poetry is less useful than a poetry oriented towards the needs and experiences of ordinary people.

The use of repetition in this instance underlines the narrator's developing response to his poem and subjects. In Book I he is considering the potential of poetry which is "like an escape of angels": in Book III he prefers poetry which is likened to a "transcendental platan."

These lines are taken from the 1845 edition of the poem, 11. 54-55, and are essentially retained for the 1849 and 1855 revised versions. The 1855 version reads as follows: "both arms stretched out wide/ On the great cross-support in the centre . . . " (11. 28-29).
CHAPTER THREE

Divine Love: Towards Recognition and Imitation

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

(VI. 592-605)

A careful consideration of this interjection of the narrator on behalf of his protagonist is essential to readers' appreciation both of Sordello and of Browning's religious concerns during the 1830's. The echoes and adaptations in the passage of Palma's "out-soul" philosophy imply a turning point in the narrator's developing sense of the ways of God and men: of equal interest is the discussion of differences and similarities between God and his "Human clear" "representative" which implies religious concerns and convictions not normally attributed to Browning until the publication date in 1850 of Christmas Eve and Easter-Day.

William Clyde DeVane, for example, argues that it was not until 1850 that Browning declared a faith based on "Divine Love, such as God showed in sending His Son to live and die among men."1 DeVane asserts
also that in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* Browning has "for the first time, reasoned out his characteristic religious ideas."² DeVane's stress on the poems of 1850 is in many ways justifiable; a reconsideration of *Sordello*, however, induces the perception that Browning is already aware of and concerned about religious problems in the 1830's. It would be misleading to argue that his ideas are as securely formulated as they are following the poems of 1850, but it would be equally misleading to overlook the religious concerns implied by *Sordello's* themes and images; the Browning canon, then, indicates the developments and continuities of the poet's religious concerns more than periodic outbursts of religious fervor. This perception of Browning's developing religious interests is in accordance with his representation's in *Sordello* of types of religious experience: Sordello's vacillations between transcendentalism and despair are shown to be less sustaining than the narrator's developing faith in God, the world, and time, the faith which encourages him to write *Sordello*.

An examination of the implications and directions of Browning's religious interests in *Sordello* should provide Browning scholars with a better understanding of the poet's developing views and place *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* in a less startling perspective. A textual explication of biblical and religious images and allusions in *Sordello* suggests Browning's interests in religious principles and creeds common to thirteenth- and nineteenth-century historical and religious experiences. For example, the poem's key characters consider the merits of faith versus doubt, free will versus determinism, faith versus good works, and the relationship between Church and State, all of which bear thirteenth- and nineteenth-century implications. Of greater significance
for the poem's themes, and for readers' sense of Browning's developing religious convictions, is the exploration of the complex significance of the crucifixion, and the suggestion that Christ's humanity is an expression of divine love and human potential. Related to this is the developing conviction that religious experience for men, women, and poets includes an imitation of the love, service, and suffering of Christ: Browning's focus, then, is on the crucifixion more than the resurrection as a pattern for human religious experience. These are, admittedly, traditional Christian notions held by a core of traditional English poets, notably Spenser, Donne, and Milton. These notions become exceptional, however, given Browning's historical positioning between Romantic and Victorian modes of thought, with the former characterized by the unbinding of the Promethean poet, and also given Browning's background in Nonconformism, with its emphasis on divine election and the resurrection. There is an energy and courage in Browning's response to religious experience in Sordello that anticipates the strength and resilience of the Pope's Christianity in The Ring and the Book, if not the Pope's clear and discriminating formulation of theological and ethical issues.

Cumulative biblical and historical allusions in Sordello intimate that religious experience on both collective and individual levels is an arduous and continuous process variously imaged in the poem as mountain climbing while dutifully supporting one's burdens, a purgative process during which one is more apt to experience setbacks than irreversible leaps forward, but which nevertheless reflects God's love, providence, and provision of truths which men can partially understand.
Despite these in some ways conventional religious concerns, Browning's readers have shown a reluctance to evaluate the religious implications of Sordello. Their reluctance is encouraged by the poem itself. The subject of religion is not announced in Sordello; indeed, the poem's title and opening pages tempt readers to think "Sordello's story" (I. 1) will be a tragedy resuscitated from the "hateful surge" (I. 20) of history, full of "ripe hate" (I. 95) and "sobs of blood" (I. 57). Yet these pejorative descriptions gradually yield to more hopeful ones as the poem's narrator clarifies the significance of Sordello's "confused shifting sort of Eden tale" (IV. 306), and progresses from a skeptical description of the "dim/ Abysmal past" (I. 18-19) to his profession of faith in a loving "Power." The progress of his soul provides a dynamic image of a nineteenth-century Christian poet confronting with fear and doubt the "ravage of six long sad hundred years" (I. 8), and finding within its experiences vestiges of a "God/ Who loves the world" (VI. 766-767). Sordello's soul, too, develops: his youthful desire to rival God's power and knowledge is converted through experience and the love of Palma to a recognition that to be god-like requires responsibility, sacrifice, and love, humanly divine qualities he demonstrates just before his death when he refuses Saliguerra's badge of power.

In the passage from Sordello used to introduce this chapter (p. ) the narrator discusses Sordello's early rivalry with divinity and suggests that the human qualities of Christ were intended partly to offset such rivalry. The passage indicates the cumulative effects of the narrator's thoughts about Palma's and Sordello's thirteenth-century images of God; the narrator's mediation between and expansion of their
developing yet limited perceptions underlines a turning point in his own growing faith. One senses that the cathartic process of writing his poem, and imagining its characters, has catalyzed perceptions and a faith that he did not have before. His discussion of the "Human clear" "representative" of God suggests a God of "Love" Palma and Sordello are incapable of imagining. Palma believes in a deterministic God of "Will" and "Power" who, for unknown reasons, ordains that she should love Sordello, yet the narrator conceives of a humanized "Power" which is the source of love, which loves mankind, and which humans by choice "can/ Love." A very different image of god, however, is reflected in Sordello's early claim that "he needs must be a God" (II. 164): he strives to attain God's power and knowledge, an aim challenged in the narrator's claim that the "Power" is "out of rivalry." The narrator, unlike Sordello, strives to imitate God's love and service, and achieves a faith in a "Power" which has "revealed" its love through the "Human clear," even though the "Power" has been "unloving all conceived by man."

The narrator's discussion of the "representative" of the "Power" who is "for authority the same" yet in "Communication different," indicates the Christian belief in the equal authority of God and Christ, and the latter's combined human and divine qualities. Differing critical evaluations of this passage underline a disinclination on the part of some critics to consider the religious implications of Sordello, and a disinclination on the part of Browning to treat religious themes in a merely doctrinal way. Critics who discuss the passage identify the "Power" as God, but differ in their responses to the "Human clear." While some critics argue that the "Human clear" is the
Son of God, others prefer secular interpretations. A. J. Whyte, for example, argues that the theme of the passage is "the Christian teaching of love as revealed through God and Christ," an argument supported by John Grube as "the only interpretation that makes sense of the text, 'Human clear' referring to God the Son, and 'Divine concealed' referring to God the Father." Similarly, W. David Shaw is convinced that the passage means "God communicates with the world through his Son." Michael Mason is less sure than Whyte, Grube, and Shaw, and mentions briefly that "there is vague talk of a 'Power' in terms that loosely suggest Christ's incarnation."

Other critics discuss the "Human clear" "Divine concealed" passage in the following secular, rather than religious terms. Stewart Walker Holmes says that the "second 'power' is 'revealed' to you as your out-soul," while Earl Hilton believes "Sordello found his link to the outer world in his dedication to the people of Italy." Holmes and Hilton are responding to the verbal echoes between this passage and Palma's "out-soul" passage, but might have considered further the implications of the narrator's adaptation of her phrasing; the concept of an "out-Nature" is similar to Palma's "out-soul" philosophy, and suggests the narrator's desire to shape, and give temporal implications to, her more Platonic image. To describe the "Power" as an "out-Nature" is an unusual choice of words, but a choice well-suited to the emphasis in the passage on the human divinity of the Power's "representative." The word "Nature" is, by definition, an apt choice: its association with "natura," meaning to be born, and with elements of nature, underline the human qualities of God's "representative." In addition, the word "Nature" is further defined as the essence, or ultimate form of
something, a definition appropriate to this combination of human and
divine qualities. Finally, to complete the argument that the passage
does indeed refer to a "Power" whose love is manifested through his
humanly divine Son, it is unlikely that the "out-Nature" refers either
to Sordello, or to the people of Italy, in the manner suggested by
Holmes and Hilton. The reason is simple: neither Sordello nor the
people of Italy could have what the "representative" has—"authority
the same" as the "Power."

Browning seems to have anticipated misinterpretations of the
passage: in the 1840 proof copy of the poem he revised the crucial
line of the text from the less obvious "To which all rivalry with this
appeared," to the more concrete "This Human clear, as that Divine
concealed." It remains to be answered, however, why the narrator
refrains here from using conventional words such as God and Christ,
words which are used elsewhere in the poem. To begin with, it is not
surprising that Browning as a poet prefers the subtle expression of
imagery to the use of more conventional descriptions, or of systematic,
theological, doctrinaire definitions. Browning's use of language in
this passage also suggests an attempt to represent religious beliefs in
ways which attempt to re-create the feelings and perceptions that pre-
ceded and shaped what have often become inflexible doctrines. This
atypical treatment of religious themes and issues is characteristic
of much of Sordello, which nevertheless indicates the young Browning's
exploration during the 1830's of religious creeds and principles, their
traditions, their differences, yet most importantly their similarities;
the human struggle to understand and to imitate God is viewed as an
admirable one which provides fundamental links between different creeds and their proponents, in the nineteenth century, and throughout human history.

These links are evident in Browning's emphasis on the contrasting yet expanding souls of the thirteenth-century Sordello and the nineteenth-century narrator, both of whom are dramatized in the process of struggling for and achieving some religious convictions. Their religious aspirations are not separated from other aspects of their lives, and are inextricably related to their responses to history, politics, secular love and poetry; religious principles seem to suffuse all of human experience in the poem.

It is important to recognize Browning's very strong sense of the relatedness of his characters' religious to their other concerns, and that he represents this in a dramatic and experiential more than a systematic way; as a poet, he rarely seems interested in promoting a particular creed, and is more interested in demonstrating the similarities among varieties of religions. He does, however, indicate some very traditional Christian beliefs in man's fallen human nature and need for redemption, beliefs he expresses through the use of traditional biblical images and allusions. References to "the Eden tale" (IV. 306) of Genesis and to God's punishment and love are linked with New Testament references to Christ's love for humanity and his crucifixion, and even to St. John's Revelation. These references, however, are often subtle or indirect, and provide an organic backdrop for the poem's thematic and historical designs rather than occupy the forefront of Sordello's story. The following explication of Browning's use of these motifs to underline human historical and religious
experiences, and of a thirteenth-century setting to illustrate nineteenth-century religious problems, illustrates that Browning was certainly concerned about the traditions and principles of Christianity well before 1850. A comparison and contrast of the developing religious convictions of Sordello and the narrator shows the young Browning making specific choices about the significance of the Christian Church as a community of men, about the strengths and weaknesses of certain tenets of Evangelicalism, and about the tensions within and between the espoused classicism and Hebraism of his contemporaries.

Browning uses the Genesis motif in Sordello to underline his sense of the related rhythms of individual and collective religious experiences throughout history: what happens in Genesis is a paradigm of subsequent biblical and historical experiences. The poem elaborates on individual and collective struggles throughout history with the difficulties presented by fallen human nature and the ubiquity of evil, both of which are suggested by the images used to describe Sordello's thirteenth-century experience of the "confused shifting sort of Eden tale" (IV. 306):

he understood
The meaning now of Palma; else why are
The great ado, the trouble wide and far,
These Guelfs and Ghibellins, the Lombard's hope
Or its despair! 'twixt Emperor and Pope
The confused shifting sort of Eden tale--
Of hardihood recurring still to fail--
That foreign interloping fiend, this free
And native overbrooding Deity--
Yet a dire fascination o'er the palms
His presence ruined troubling thorough calms
Of Paradise--or, on the other hand,
The Pontiff, as your Kaisers understand,
That, snake-like cursed of God to love the ground,
With lulling eye breaks in the noon profound
Some saving tree—who but the Kaiser drest
As the dislodging angel of the pest
Then? yet that pest bedropt, flat head, full fold,
With coruscating dower of dyes: behold
The secret, so to speak, and master-spring
Of the whole contest! which of them shall bring
Men good—perchance the most good—ay; it may
Be that; the question is which knows the way.

[IV. 301-323]

The images link the dilemma of Sordello’s choice to support either the Guelfs or the Ghibellins to that of Adam and Eve, who were presented with a similarly difficult choice.17 Guelfs and Ghibellins, the Pope and the Emperor, are both imaged as satanic presences in the “Eden” of Italy: the Kaisers believe the Pontiff to be “Snake-like cursed of God to love the ground,” and the Pontiff sees the Kaiser as “the dis- lodging angel” who has the deathly “dower of dyes.” Sordello’s choice seems to be, dishearteningly, between two evils, yet the passage also contains subtle allusions to a presence which offsets the evil. First of all, readers are told that the “hardihood”—human capability and potential—of the “Eden tale” is recurring still to fail, which implies some tensions between human perseverance and human fallibility. This does not mean, however, that men are doomed to fail; rather, the phrasing suggests dynamic possibilities for success or failure. In addition to human “hardihood,” the passage alludes to the grace and love of God extended to support human fallibility; allusions to the redemptive implications of the “saving tree,” however, must be viewed in relation to the “palm’s which are “ruined” during the redemptive process, and also to the cross. We are reminded, then, of the relations between human sinfulness and God’s sacrifices. An underlying implication of these allusions is that men must earn, or merit, their redemption by
imitating the love, service, and suffering of Christ. The narrator's acceptance of this belief is described in terms which indicate his acquiescence to the difficulties imposed on men by God:

whereas for Mankind springs
Salvation--hindrances are interposed
For them, not all "Life's view at once disclosed
To creatures sudden on its summit left
With Heaven above and yet of wings bereft--
But lower laid, as at the mountain's foot
Where, range on range, the girdling forests shoot
Between the prospect and the throngs who scale
Earnestly ever, piercing veil by veil,
Confirmed with each discovery. . .
(VI. 275-284)

A metaphor of mountain climbing is used to describe human life as an on-going religious experience during which men seek "Salvation" by beginning "lower" at the "mountain's foot," and by using "the space/ Of time we judge so meagre" (VI. 286-287) to "scale" the mountain, thereby seeking the "Whole" by its "Parts" (VI. 288-289). This sense of a continuous process of salvation is an integral aspect of Browning's response in the 1830's to varieties of religious experiences, and we can see him suggesting alternatives to certain tenets of the Evangelical tradition. In particular, this passage shows no sense of Evangelical doctrines of election, of permanently transforming religious experiences, or of justification by faith alone, doctrines which disallow the notion of free will and of meriting one's salvation. At the end of this passage we are told that those who attain the "Whole" have gained nothing "But leave to look--no leave to do" (VI. 290); it is clear that Browning values both deeds and time, and is exploring the implications of certain religious concerns.
That his exploration is part of a developing process which gains momentum during the 1830's to be articulated later with more force, is supported by Browning's revisions of this passage for the 1863 edition of the poem. The revisions energize and affirm wholeheartedly the process of gaining salvation by "each" providentially interposed hindrance, and the addition of the word "each" is just one of many ways in which the passage has been revised to underline Browning's sense of difficult yet creative process:

whereas for Mankind springs
'Salvation by each hindrance interposed:
'They climb; life's view is not at once disclosed
'To creatures caught up, on the summit left,
'Heaven plain above them, yet of wings bereft:
'But lower laid, as at the mountain's foot.
'So, range on range, the girding forests shoot
"Twixt your plain prospect and the throngs who scale
'Height after height, and pierce mists, veil by veil,
'Heartened with each discovery; in their soul,
'The Whole they seek by Parts—but, found that Whole,
'Could they revert, enjoy past gains?
(VI. 274-285)

The change in tone from the acquiescence of the original to the affirmation of the revised passage suggests Browning's developing sense that the world, time, and process of "Salvation" are to be participated in joyfully, not just endured. A sense of energetic and difficult movement is introduced to the passage through the addition of mid-line commas (compare the effect of the original "Earnestly ever, piercing veil by veil" with the revised "Height after height, and pierce mists, veil after veil") and the revision of polysyllabic words to monosyllabic: "Earnestly" is revised to "Height;" "Between" is replaced with "'Twixt." One should note also the addition of the verb "climb," the actions of which the rhythms of the passage imitate. In effect, the Browning of
1865 indicates a more "Heartened" response to Christianity than he did in the 1830's, during which he seems more stoical, and resigned to tribulations. It is clear, however, that he is exploring religious principles, and establishing convictions he would adhere to for the rest of his life.

Browning's explorations and developing convictions are suggested most clearly in Sordello by the homiletics of a mysterious "low voice" who, in Book V, 11. 80-290, tries to persuade Sordello that his ambition to complete the processes of history by renewing the imagined perfections of Rome is contrary to the partially understood purposes of God who uses the tribulations of history to induce men such as Sordello to make use of their potential. The tone of the "voice" is exhortative as it argues that Sordello has a religious and ethical responsibility to the "multitude" to use the opportunities provided by history and his poetic gifts to ease its woes:

fortune wafts
This very age, her best inheritance
Of opportunities. Yet we advance
Upon the last! Since talking is your trade,
There's Salinguerra left you to persuade.

(V. 286-290)

There is, however, a condition. Sordello is not told by this enigmatic voice exactly what he is to persuade Salinguerra to do, a deliberate omission which clarifies the implications of the classical allusion with which the "low voice" passage begins:

And then a low voice wound into his heart:
Sordello (lower than a Pythoess
Conceding to a Lydian King's distress
The cause of his long error—-one mistake
Of her past oracle) Sordello, wake!

(V. 80-84)
In his notes to the Yale edition of Browning, John Pettigrew points out that the allusion is to Croesus, King of Lydia, who "was told by the Delphic Oracle that if he crossed the river Halys he would overthrow an empire; he crossed it, and destroyed his own empire. After his defeat he was told he might have asked which empire was meant." Sordello, like Croesus, extracts only what he wants to hear; the point, however, is that he is given both the choice and the opportunity. As it turns out, Sordello, like Croesus, makes the wrong choice in his decision to support the Guelfs and the Papacy; his decision is contrary to the teachings of the "voice" and of Palma.

Browning's allusion to Croesus and the Delphic Oracle at the beginning of a lengthy and significant discourse about the growth of Christianity and the ways of God is quite typical of his treatment of classical-Christian themes in Sordello and in subsequent poems. Although other Victorians such as Arnold sought to establish radical differences between what he called Hellenism and Hebraism, Browning is more apt to establish their similarities, and to see Christianity as continuous with both, and as completing both. It interests him that classical mythology, like Christianity, can treat prophecy with a sense of irony, and that the prophecies of both reveal only partially understood truths which men must interpret with imagination, memory, and reason. A closer look at the "low voice" passage will illuminate the Christian-humanist principles operative in Sordello, resisted by its protagonist, and adopted by the narrator.

The "voice" explains to Sordello that his experience of the thirteenth-century conflicts between Guelfs and Ghibellins, the Church and the State, is a paradigm of the kinds of tribulative experiences
sustained by the Christian Church and its followers throughout human history; in addition, Sordello's conflict over the difficulty of his choice is a paradigm of individuals' struggles since the creation of mankind. He is urged to view his dilemma as an opportunity to contribute to the collective achievements of mankind, and is warned about the vanity of his ambition to complete the processes of history:

Sordello, wake!
Where is the vanity? Why count you, one
The first step with the last step?
(V. 84-86)

Browning's additions to this passage in the 1863 edition of the poem suggest a desire to clarify and expand its meaning. They also suggest, through their emphasis on "hope" and "heart," that the later Browning has a growing faith in a merciful as well as a challenging God:

'Sordello, wake!
'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: what's dispersed
'Save hope of that supreme step which, descried
'Earliest, was meant still to remain untried,
'Only to give you heart to take your own
'Step, and there stay, leaving the rest alone?
'Where is the vanity? Why count as one
'The first step, with the last step?...
'That last step you'd take first?--an evidence
'You were God: be man now! Let those glances fall!
'The basis, the beginning step of all,
'Which proves you just a man--is that gone too?
'Pity to disconcert, one versed as you
'In fate's ill-nature! but its full extent
'Blades Sordello, even: the veil is rent,
'Read the black writing--that collective man
'Outstrips the individual.

(V. 84-104)

Browning added to the 1863 edition lines 85-92, and the following line: "evidence/ 'You were God: be man now!" The thrust of these revisions
is to remind Sordello of the difference between men and God which has
created the difference between man's "minute's work" and "time's
completed plan": the difference is determined by the original sin
suggested by the allusion to "the beginning step of all," "Which proves
you just a man," and by the image of the rent veil which refers us to
the crucifixion described in St. Luke 23:45: "And the sun was darkened,
and the veil of the temple was rent," the meaning of which continues
to elude Sordello. References to human sinfulness and to the cruci-
fixion underline aspects of human experience which Sordello tries again
and again to resist, the sometimes painful challenges designed by God
to induce purifications on individual and collective levels which contri-
bute to the only dimly perceived "Supreme step." Although the revisions
to the 1863 edition clarify and sharpen the poem's emphasis on the
crucifixion as a pattern for individual and collective experiences,
the images in the 1840 edition of Sordello indicate that there are more
continuities than differences in Browning's response to religious
experience: references to the "beginning step," the rent veil, and
the "last step" are retained from the original, and balance a profound
sense of human sinfulness with faith in the divine creative purpose
and in human potential.

The "voice" relentlessly describes to Sordello the painful
tribulations endured by a "company" (V. 135) of Italian, biblical and
historical men and women who have struggled valiantly with the burdens
imposed on them by God from biblical times to the thirteenth century. Allusions to Nina, a twelfth-century Italian poet, are interwoven with
allusions to the founders and usurpers of the great medieval papacy.
To this unlikely combination are added allusions to Moses and Paul,
the hermit Peter and St. Francis of Assisi, all of whom, including Sordello, are shown to share a common bond: they are participants in what is imaged as the "chain" (V. 180) and "vine" (V. 199) of history which progresses despite uneven rhythms and frequent setbacks: "For one thrust forward, fifty such fall back!" (V. 182). This point is made again in reference to the time when Sordello must forge his link with this illustrious historical chain, and run the "race" to join the "company":

Who means to help must still support the load
Hildebrand lifted—why hast Thou, he groaned,
Imposed, my God, a thing thy Paul had moaned,
Thy Moses failed beneath, on me? and yet
That grandest of the tasks God ever set
On man 'left much to do: a mighty wrench—
The scaffold falls—half the pillars bleech
Merely, start back again—perchance have been
Taken for buttresses: crash every screen,
Hammer the tenons better, and engage
A gang about your work

........................................

Ay, then perchance may start
Sordello on his race—but who'll divulge
Time's secrets? lo, a step's awry, a bulge
To be corrected by a step we thought
Got over long ago—till that is wrought,
No progress!

(V. 206-223)

Sordello hears of the fearful doubts experienced by those who chose to "support the load" imposed by a demanding taskmaster, and learns that their tasks, albeit completed, "left much to do." The energy and anguish of these men are reflected in a poetry whose rhythms spill over from one line to the next, and whose clauses stop abruptly within lines only to surge forth on verbs such as "crash" and "hammer" which embody the described labors and emotions. The struggles and doubts of these men are indirectly aligned with those experienced by the crucified
Christ: the phrases "why hast Thou ... my God" echo Christ's words on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" We see Browning again using the pattern of the crucifixion to underline individual and collective religious and historical experiences. Along with these bleak and demanding images, however, is the sense of "progress" reflected in the images of building scaffolds and buttresses, some of which survive "falls" to "start back again." This is a hard-earned yet fruitful "progress" which Browning suggests will continue for an indeterminable length of time.

Organic images of fruit and vines help to temper the effect of the voice's descriptions of the "work" and "progress" through the ages, as well as to link the stories with the Genesis experience of the fruits of both forbidden and saving trees. For example, consider the following description of Hildebrand, founder of the great medieval papacy:

see you stand
Buttressed upon his mattock Hildebrand
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
At dead-lock, agonizing he, until
The victor thought leap radiant up, and Will,
The slave with folded arms and drooping lids
They fought for, lean forth flame-like as it bids.
---A root, the crippled mandrake of the earth,
Thwarted and dwarfed and blasted in its birth,
Be certain; fruit of suffering's excess... . .
(V. 153-167)

The striking description of Hildebrand's "Will" leaning forth "flame-like" after agony of conflicting thoughts is followed by images of the will as a "crippled mandrake," "blasted in its birth," yet still, ironically, the "fruit of suffering's excess." It was original sin which "dwarfed and blasted" the human will, yet the organic "root" retains the potential to bear the "fruit of suffering's excess."
The implication is that the will, despite being "crippled," remains partly free, and that it is this freedom which enables it to "lean forth flame-like" at Hildebrand's bidding.

Sordello is being told indirectly by the "voice" that his will, too, is free, and that he must channel it despite his indecisiveness about whether to support the Pope or the Emperor; it is his turn to "race" (V. 219). To aid Sordello in his choice the "voice" refers him to the eras of Charlemagne and Hildebrand, who were, respectively, equally powerful and successful Emperors and Popes; the State was supreme during the rule of Charlemagne, and the Church was supreme during the rule of Hildrebrand. Hildebrand, however, was succeeded by Popes more concerned with making money than with encouraging the ethical teachings of the Church, a situation which continued to deteriorate through to Sordello's time when Innocent III was pitted against Friedrich II in a savage and destructive civil war.

Sordello is asked to look carefully at the history of the relationship between the Church as a community of men and the State, and indeed asks, "Is't so sure/ God's Church lives by a King's investiture?" (V. 145-146). He is invited to see the relationship between Church and State as uneven yet dynamic and developing, and to recognize the difficulties experienced by the Church he wants to idealize. He is invited to view positively the processes of providential time which have enabled men of both Church and State throughout history to respond to God's challenges, to make the best of their opportunities, and to provide checks and balances for each other's inadequacies. Because during the 1224 siege of Ferrara Innocent III was abusing papal power and therefore discrediting religious authority, Friedrich II was in some
ways justified in his attempt to wrest power from the Church. Sordello, however, does not see this; nor does he absorb the import of the voice's homiletics about the dynamic tensions between Church and State implied by Browning's emphasis on the positive achievements of both Hildebrand and Charlemagne. Sordello insists that "the Past is yet redeemable whose work/ Was--help the Guelfs" (V. 294-295), and proceeds to try to persuade Salinguerra to

"Assist the Pope, Extend his domination, fill the scope Of the Church based, on All, by All, for All-- Change Secular to Evangelical. . . ." (V. 381-384)

His endeavour to use his poetic faculties to this end is sincere, but misguided, and limited in its effect:

Yet most Sordello's argument dropped flat Through his accustomed fault of breaking yoke, Disjoining him who felt from him who spoke. . . . (V. 321-323)

Sordello is neither an epic Christian poet or hero; rather, he is an ordinary man in an extraordinary situation who, if he accepts his human limitations, and does his "work," can become an imperfect Christian hero. His final choice to serve mankind is the product of so great an effort that he dies, yet he dies with

A triumph lingering in the wide eyes Wider than some spent swimmer's if he spies Help from above in his extreme despair. . . . (VI. 618-620)

In a letter written to Elizabeth in 1845 in which he discusses Sordello in very general terms, Browning sheds some light on the significance of
this passage. He notes that

yesterday I was reading the "Purgatorio" and the first speech of the group of which Sordello makes one struck me with a new significance, as well as describing the man and his purpose and fate in my own poem--see; one of the burthened, contorted souls tells Virgil and Dante--

Here, Browning quotes the original before proceeding to translate it, following his interjection "Which is just my Sordello's story..."

And sinners were we to the extreme hour;
Then, light from heaven fell, making us aware,
So that, repenting us and pardoned, out
Of life we passed to God, at peace with Him
Who fills the heart with yearning him to see.

Browning's comments and translation of Dante imply that even the late-repentant Sordello has "passed to God." Sordello's repentance is met with forgiveness, and in this way he forges his link with an organic vine that joins the work of ages throughout history.

The frequent allusions to "work" in Sordello imply a distinctly Carlylean context; and an awareness of the well-known exhortation in Sartor Resartus to "Know what thou canst work at." In the 1840 edition of the poem the "voice" asks, "Was it Sordello pried into the work/ So far accomplished, and discovering lurk/ A company..." (V. 133-134). The "voice" subsequently observes that "E'en were Sordello ready to forego/ His work for this, 'twere overleaping work/ Some one must do before..." (V. 202-204). Browning drew further attention to Carlylean allusions and their implications in the running titles added to the poem for the 1863 edition which underline his emphasis in Sordello on the progressive nature of history, and on the significance of the individuals who contribute to its fulfillment: "The last of
each series of workmen sums up in himself all predecessors. We just see Charlemagne, Hildebrand, in composite work they end and name."^30 Browning's emphasis on "workmen" and their "composite work" suggests his agreement with Carlyle's work ethic and his focus on the nineteenth century.

Sordello is very much about the responsibilities of a nineteenth-century poet confronting fallen human nature by exploring contemporary, historical, biblical, and literary precedents to help him decide "what might be singing's use." The reference to utilitarian usefulness implies a response to Bentham and his followers, and to their distrust of things poetical and religious. Browning's emphasis in Sordello on the purgative and painful aspects of religious and historical experience conflicts with Bentham's pleasure-pain principle. In Bbk III Sordello goes through a rationalistic phase during which he voices the logic of the Benthamites to justify his quest for "Pleasure" and "Happiness":

Ay, Happiness
Awaited me; the way life should be used
Was to acquire, and deeds like you conduced
To teach it by a self-revealment (deemed
That very use too long). Whatever seemed
Progress to that was Pleasure; aught that stayed
My reaching it--No Progress.

(III. 150-156)

Browning is undermining Bentham's pleasure-pain principle by having Sordello express it when he is at his most arrogant and selfish. According to Browning, it is the willing acceptance of pain in the service of God and mankind that is going to earn individual and collective salvation, not the shirking of pain for pleasure. By placing nineteenth-century utilitarian principles in the words of the thirteenth-century
Sordello, Browning illustrates parallels between Victorian utilitarianism and Renaissance rationalism, and his sense of the similarities between the religious tensions of these periods runs much deeper.

A cursory look at the situation of the English Church in the 1830's indicates further the logic of Browning's choice of the thirteenth-century conflict between Church and State as a suitable background for his Victorian poem. The tension between Guelfs and Ghibellins, Church and State, has a nineteenth-century counterpart. The Reform Bill of 1832 threatened both the bishops and properties of the Church, and was the product of justifiable concerns about its principles and priorities. But of greater significance for Browning's purpose was the renewed interest in the traditions and authority of Catholicism spearheaded by Cardinal Newman whose beliefs were persuasively articulated in the Tracts published between 1833 and 1841 during the years Browning was working on Sordello. It is difficult to imagine that Browning's choice of an historical setting that marked the decline of medieval papal control was unaffected by the Oxford movement which initiated the religious revival of the nineteenth century. Sordello is full of allusions to medieval and Catholic rituals, and indicates the young Browning's consideration of some of the tenets of Catholicism, particularly its sense of the significance of the Church throughout history. One sees this most clearly in Sordello in the "low voice" passage, the allusions of which indicate an interest in the rise and fall of the medieval papacy, and approval of the notion of "company" or community of men contributing throughout history to the divine creative purpose. What is interesting and unusual about Browning's response to the idea of a Christian Church is that he does
not confine it to a particular creed, which is illustrated by his inclusion of Charlemagne, the opponent of papal power, in his "company" of men faithfully imitating Christ, the spiritual guardian of the Christian Church. Although his allusions imply a favourable response to Newman's sense of the significance of Apostolic descent, Browning remains skeptical of the Catholic tendency to idealize its Popes and its Church, and to engage in what the speaker in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day calls the "raree-show" of ritual. As has been shown in the discussions of the "low voice" passage, Browning's emphasis has been on the human doubts and difficult travails of the founders of the medieval Church, not their infallible perfections.32

It is his ability to recognize the merits and weaknesses of the medieval Church that sets Browning apart from contemporary medievalists. The tendency to idealize the period is typified by Newman's essay, "The Religion of the Day," in which he chastizes Victorians for not having retained the Christian piety of the Middle Ages:

> the present age is the very contrary to what are commonly called the dark ages; and together with the faults of those ages we have lost their virtues . . . , for even the errors then prevalent . . . , fear of religious inquiry, bigotry, these were, after all, but perversion and excesses of real virtues, such as zeal and reverence.33

Nineteenth-century Evangelicals, too, idealized the quality of medieval religious experience, associating it with a primitive Pauline Christianity they sought to reestablish.

It is not surprising that Catholic medievalists and Evangelicals alike repudiated the Renaissance: the former associated it with the Réformation, while the latter deplored its paganism. Browning seems
aware of these tendencies in *Sordello*, which partly explains why he chose a late-medieval, early-Renaissance setting. *Sordello* is in part the product of a desire to offset the extreme views his contemporaries had of the religious preoccupations of both periods, by focusing on what he perceives to be the continuities between them marked by the "composite work" of a "company" of men responding faithfully to the challenges of the providential God who allows, and encourages, growth and change. The experiences of the medieval Church are shown to have been far from ideal, yet its traditions, weaknesses and achievements are related in the poem to a creative response to human imperfection, and to human contributions throughout history to the fulfillment of God's partially revealed plans.

Browning is less sure in the 1830's of the merits of certain responses to religion typical of the thirteenth-century Italian Renaissance which some nineteenth-century contemporaries were idealizing, and encouraging Victorians to emulate: their interests in a sometimes irreligious Catholicism, and in a classicism which valued culture more than the ethical teachings of religion, seem to have induced Browning's creation of an historically more accurate and objective image of the thirteenth century which undermines idealized images of that period without dismissing it as pagan or godless. There are several allusions in *Sordello* to the kinds of religious figures Ruskin decried as godless. Consider, for example, the narrator's erotic description of classical-religious figures decorating a Roman bath:
And now they tire the artificer upon
Black alabaster, black obsidion,
--Careful Jove's face be duly fulgurant,
And mother Venus' kiss-creased nipples pant
Back into pristine pulpiness, ere fixed
Above the baths.

(V. 41-46)

Christianity has traditionally been uncomfortable with combinations of
eroticism and religion, notwithstanding the Song of Solomon, yet this
passage is not nearly as problematic as the sensuality of Browning's
perverse Bishop in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's
Church," the Renaissance poem published in 1845 which Browning sets in
"Rome, 15--." The font-tomb at Goito also contains incongruously yoked
erotic and religious impulses, and the consistency of Browning's
representation of this aspect of the Italian Renaissance implies his
continued censure. It is not surprising that he elaborates this theme
in "Fra Lippo Lippi"; further elaborations of this complex subject
occur in The Ring and the Book (1863) in terms of the quasi-sexual
and religious affinity between the priest Caponsacchi and Pompilia.

The point is not, however, that Browning is repudiating the
Italian Renaissance, its classicism, or its worldly Catholicism. He
seems instead to be illustrating the fact that religion in the period
is characterized by these extremes, and that these extremes result in
problematic, sometimes aberrant behaviour that Victorians should be
fully aware of in their attempts to resuscitate the spirit of the
Renaissance. In effect, classicists are encouraged to view classicism
in its entirety, replete with its classical-pagan and sometimes sensual
heritage, and Catholics are invited to look equally carefully at the
traditions they want to revitalize. Yet Browning does not represent
the Renaissance only in terms of these extremes; indeed, in each of
these poems there are elements which offset and balance the extremes mentioned above. In Sordello, for example, allusions to the Christian deeds of Charlemagne, Hildebrand, St. Francis, and Matilda, the self-sacrificial love demonstrated by Palma, and Sordello's final resolution to serve mankind, combine to indicate Browning's faith in both human nature and God, and his reluctance to repudiate a period of human history simply because of its extremes. The same is true of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church": readers are given indications of the scorn and disbelief of those who receive the Bishop's orders, and are also reminded of the deeds of Saint Praxed, the founder of the Church. In The Ring and the Book, of course, the wisdom, integrity, knowledge and courage of the Pope exemplify the best of a religion which is imperfect, but which nevertheless possesses the strength of a heritage based on admirable Christian principles.

Browning is aware, then, of the religious extremes operative in the Italian Renaissance between paganism and Catholicism, yet tries to offset them with allusions to and examples of a developing Christian humanism which he avoids confining to a particular creed. Sordello, for example, seems again to be a paradigm of all that is confusing and contradictory in Renaissance religious experience, vacillating between a mystical Catholicism and worldliness, and exhibiting tendencies we now associate with both Evangelicalism and Catholicism: we see in his character the kinds of tensions that eventually result in the split between Catholic and Protestant principles, and which are also present in nineteenth-century religious controversies. His extremes, of course, are offset by and counterpointed with the developing Christian humanism of the narrator, and a consideration of their contrasted views on
specific issues such as the relationship between man and God, the significance of the body, soul and time, and the degree to which the human will is free, should further clarify the developing religious convictions of Browning in the 1830's.

Sordello in his youth has an idealistic temperament given to Neoplatonic, evangelical religious experiences which are intense, transcendental, and which involve an isolated relationship between his soul and God. Browning is sympathetic towards this approach to religious experience, but he points out ways in which it is self-frustrating, contrary to much of human nature, and disparaging to God's creation of the world. He shows it to be a universal inclination which is therefore common to both the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, and compares it with the kind of religious experience undergone by the narrator, who develops a sense of religion as a life-long purgative process which involves honest doubts and persistent endeavours to understand God's ways. A fundamental difference between the two men is their understanding of the nature of divinity and truth. The narrator's gradual understanding and imitation of divine service and love lies at the thematic core of the poem; Sordello's initial response to the divine as a mystical and secretive figurehead of power to which he, as a poet, is elected to aspire, lays the foundation for his series of dualized responses to the religious questions he asks.

As a young poet Sordello is at first concerned only with otherworldly matters of soul, eternity, and the divine, detaching himself from the body, matter, time, and the rabble of mankind in his quest to "be a God" (II. 164). The gradual revelation that divinity is merited only after difficult travels comes as a great shock to Sordello. He
is far more intrigued with the transcendental powers of his soul than
with the significance of his body and earthly life, and has no sense
of a creative bond between what he sees as unrelated entities. Early
in the poem Sordello observes that his body and soul are separate:

Whereas it [his body] left her [his soul] free to range,
Remains itself a blank, cast into shade,
Encumbers little, if it cannot aid.
So, range my soul! (II. 408-411)

His flesh, and by implication the material world, is only a "blank" or
"shade" which is inferior to the pure realm of spirit Sordello equates
with his soul. The narrator places him with the class of poets who
believe their poetic souls are elect, which sets them apart from other
men and enables them to perceive the divine. Sordello's religious
inclinations are intimately related to his sense of the function of
poetry, and he directs both towards his aspirations to divinity. His
religious-aesthetic experiences involve meditations on objects of
physical beauty which are chosen to inspire him towards a state of
mystical transcendence, thereby allowing him to perceive the divine.
It is the narrator, rather than Sordello, who describes the gestation
of this kind of poet's soul, and he creates an hypnotic description of
this kind of mystical religious experience:

fresh births of beauty wake
Fresh homage; every grade of love is past,
With every mode of loveliness; then cast
 Inferior idols off their borrowed crown
Before a coming glory: up and down
Runs arrowy fire, while earthly forms combine
To throb the secret forth; a touch divine--
And the scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod:
Visibly through his garden walketh God.
(I. 502-510)
The passage contains conventional Neoplatonic images of the transforming and mystical process of ascent as "every grade of love is past" during the quest for the experience of the "coming glory." Our sense of this "glory" is intensified through the use of the verbs "throbs" and "Runs," and its mysteriousness is conveyed by allusions to the "secret." The mystic's power and privilege are suggested by the fact that he "owns the mystic rod," and that "Visible through his garden walketh God." 35 This transcendental experience is both aesthetic and religious: the "births of beauty" which inspire the ascent are soon cast off as "Inferior idols," since they are only shadows or reflections of the final vision of God. To prevent our becoming overly enthralled with such rapturous experiences, the narrator begins pointing out some implications of transcendentalism, noting that those who are "Thrusting in time eternity's concern" (I. 574) eventually find the world's occasion worthless since
Not absolutely fitted to evince
Its mastery. . . .
(I. 567-569)

Our attention is directed to the very basic problem that transcendentalism denies time and life in the natural world and, by implication, God's creation of them. Browning, through the narrator, is questioning the implications of transcendental religious experiences common to several religions, including Platonism, Evangelicalism, and Catholicism.

Yet the narrator shows compassion for men like Sordello,

Who, still discovering beauty without end,
Amass the scintillations for one star
--Something unlike them, self-sustained, afar,
And meanwhile nurse the dream of being blest
By winning it to notice and invest
Their souls with alien glory some oneday.

(VI. 69-74)
and acknowledges the frustrations they must endure while "Waiting for
death to live" (VI. 85), living a life of

What Hell shall be—A progress thus pursued
Through all existence, still above the food
That's offered them, still towering beyond.
The widened range in virtue of their bond
Of sovereignty.

(VI. 86-90)

The real tragedy of Sordello's obsession with the divinity and separateness of his soul is shown to be his dissatisfaction with the created world and his human limitations. His exaltation of his soul places him in the extreme position of dismissing the body as a "blank," which drives him towards the extreme of asceticism; and when this extreme becomes intolerable, he leans towards libertinism. His sense of the split between body and soul contributes to the problems experienced in his relationship with Palma described in the preceding chapter.

The narrator identifies and corrects Sordello's imbalances, pointing out ways in which his extremism might be tempered:

abjure the soul, content
With body, therefore! Scarcely had he bent
Himself in dream thus low when matter fast
Cried out, he found, for spirit to contrast
And task it duly

Then would some rough peasant—Paul
Like those old Ecelin confers with, glance
His gay apparel o'er; that countenance
Gathered his shattered fancy into one,
And, body clean abolished, soul alone
Sufficed the grey Paulician: by and by
To balance the ethereality
Passions were needed; foiled he sunk again.

(II. 870-884)

What is described are Sordello's vacillations between asceticism and passion, and his inability to conceive of a creative way to affirm the
interdependence of body and soul. Our response is guided by the narrator who has an intuitive sense that "matter" needs spirit to "task it" and that the spirit needs "Passions" to temper its "ethereality." His belief that the material world and human body have an intrinsic purpose contrasts sharply with Sordello's dismissal of them as "blank."

It is at this point in the poem that Sordello and the narrator are most at odds, for while Sordello's soul is showing his limitations, the narrator's is reflecting his potential. The diction of the narrator becomes increasingly religious and ethical, underlining his strengthening convictions and understanding of Sordello's very human limitations. He asserts, for example, that "a Soul's no whit/ More than the Body's purpose under it" (VI. 565-566), and that both should be directed towards the common goal of achieving a particular kind of "Joy":

Soul on Matter being thrust,
'Tis Joy when so much Soul is wreaked in Time
On Matter,--let the Soul attempt sublime
Matter beyond its scheme and so prevent
Or more, or less, that deed's accomplishment,
And Sorrow follows: Sorrow to avoid--
Let the Employer match the thing Employed,
Fit to the finite his infinity. . .
(VI. 494-501).

Sordello's problem has always been his attempt to force his Soul "beyond its scheme," and to refuse to "Fit to the finite his infinity." His unrealistic goals to perfect mankind and to complete the processes of history, when confronted with their impossibility, lead to "Sorrow," not "Joy."

Browning's representations of "Soul" in Sordello are refreshingly imaginative and fluid. Rather than define soul in theological terms, or try to explain what it is, he focuses on the sense of process he
associates with it, and on its potential for expansion and growth. Soul, for Browning, fulfills its God-created purpose when it is
"Wreaked in Time," surely an unusual choice of verb and activity for
one's soul. In Sordello the progress of souls is directed towards
earth as well as towards heaven, towards what they can do in the finite
world to earn infinity. It is the union of body and soul which is
celebrated, not the final separation of the soul from the flesh.
Browning uses a metaphor of sky and water to represent this union: 36

(A breadth of watery heaven like a bay,
A sky-like space of water, ray for ray
And star for star, one richness where they mixed
As this and that wing of an angel, fixed
Tumultuary splendors folded in
To die). 37

(VI. 567-572)

The images are appealingly soft and delicate, with no sense of tension
until we arrive at "Tumultuary" and "die," which introduce an uneasi-
ness meant to emulate the creative tension between body and soul that
must precede the touch of an angel's wing.

Browning carries this sense of creative tension over to his
representations in the poem of the function and operations of the
human will which is viewed as something apart from, yet related to,
the soul and body. By itself, the soul is said to be incapable of
bodying forth its will, which implies that the will provides a kind of
link between body and soul:

he [Sordello] found
Not only that a soul, howe'er its might,
Is insufficient to its own delight
Both in corporeal organs and in skill
By means of such to body forth its Will—

(II. 564-568)
Several commentators have discussed Sordello's inability to put his will into action, but they do so in secular, rather than the religious, terms implied by the language of this passage. Earl Hilton, for example, examines the poem as "the study of the human will and factors which stimulate or block it," and notes that the word "will" is used "at least twenty-four times in the poem." 38 His essay is restricted to the contrasts between Sordello's inactive will and the active wills of characters such as Salinguerra and Ecelin, and is not concerned with allusions in the poem to the wills of religious figures such as Moses, Paul or the "voice." What Hilton has overlooked, then, is Browning's provision within Sordello of ethical and religious responses to the human will which offset both Sordello's inactive will and the active yet corrupt wills of Salinguerra and Ecelin. Sordello reflects Browning's interest in the long-standing and knotty tensions between determinism and free will present within the classical, biblical, and Christian traditions, and with which the Renaissance, in particular, was so preoccupied. These tensions are treated in the poem as universal problems which were prevalent in both the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. 39

Sordello's vacillating ideas and complaints about what he believes to be initially an omnipotent, and later a fettered will, establish the polarities considered by Browning, with the narrator again serving as the mediator between them. This thesis is interested not so much in Sordello's vacillations as in the narrator's discriminations between kinds of will, and in his response to Evangelical or Nonconformist notions of predestination or election. The following
observation by the narrator illustrates both Sordello's problem, and
the narrator's solution. He says of Sordello that.

His will swayed sickly from side to side
Nor merely neutralized his waking act
But tended e'en in fancy to distract
The intermediate will, the choice of means.

(II. 863-866)

Again and again in Sordello the narrator wonders who or what is to
blame for Sordello's failures. This passage introduces the idea of
an "intermediate will" that presumably lies between God's will and
Sordello's, and that provides "the choice of means;" the "intermediate
will," it is assumed, belongs to Sordello. His "intermediate will"
seems to be an extension, or remnant, of man's originally intact
will said by the "voice" to have been "crippled" by original sin, yet
still to be capable of bearing "fruit." The processes of religious
experience represented in the poem indicate, always indirectly, that
man's extension of his "intermediate will" will be met and supported
by God if judged to be sincere. On the other hand, there are times
when God elects certain individuals to perform tasks, yet these tasks
cannot be fulfilled if not met by the extension of the human will.
For example, the "voice" tells Sordello that Paul complained about
the "burthen" God had "Imposed" on him, yet the task would not have
been completed if Paul had not chosen to extend his will. This pro-
cess shows Browning's attempt to reconcile the seeming opposites of
election and free will.

Sordello chooses not to extend his will, which is why, despite
all his potential, he remains unsuccessful in love, politics and poetry.
In Book V we learn from the narrator that what Sordello lacked was an
outward influence,
A soul, in Palma's phrase, above his soul,
Power to uplift his power, this moon's control,
Over the sea-depths,

but years and years the sky above
Held none, and so, untasked of any love,
His sensitiveness idled

So had Sordello been, by consequence,
Without a function: others made pretense
To strengths not half his own, yet had some core
Within.  

(VI. 41-61)

At first glance it would appear that someone or something is being blamed for not providing the "outward influence" Sordello lacked, but Browning is not prepared to blame others for Sordello's inadequacies. Sordello is "untasked of any love" and subsequently "without a function," but we know that Palma offered both love and a function. The phrase has to mean, then, that Sordello did not love anything enough to task himself to win or fulfill it, and that it is his self-imposed lack of will, or "core" that is to blame. In keeping with this interpretation is the description of Sordello's death and qualified "triumph": his late repentance is enough of a sincere extension of his will to merit the forgiveness and acceptance he receives.

God is represented in Sordello above all else as forgiving and loving, and it is this love which Sordello finally recognizes: the love evident in God's creation of the world and men, in his forgiveness of the first and subsequent transgressors, in the endured suffering of the crucifixion, and in the gifts of challenging and joyful time. It is this same love which the narrator chooses to imitate when he speaks to us in Book III from nineteenth-century Venice, voicing his God-like love for the "warped men, souls and bodies!"
(III. 779) seen all around him, and willingly accepts his poet's task of imparting "the gift of seeing to the rest" (III. 866). What he sees and represents is the subject of the next and final chapter which explores Browning's developing theory of poetry.
Notes

1 DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 203. This standard view is reflected by Philip Drew in A Critical Introduction, p. 224, in his observation that Browning's religious beliefs can be seen "as early as 1850."

2 DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 203.

3 See Lionel L. Stevenson's "The Key Poem," for a convincing discussion of Sordello as the poem which marks a turning point between Romantic and Victorian poetry.

4 See Maynard, Browning's Youth, pp. 55-62, for a sensitive evaluation of Browning's religious background that discriminates between Browning's appreciation of the sincerity and simplicity of the evangelical religion, and his habit of sampling different ministers and churches without choosing a particular church.

5 This phrase is a good example of the poem's indirect references to Christ: Browning seems here to be suggesting the following biblical passage: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," St. John 3:16. It is quite typical of Browning's extension of responsibility to the reader to omit a crucial part of a phrase.

6 Sordello's pro-Guelf sympathies are tested when his father, Salinguerra, offers him the Ghibellin badge of power. If Sordello had accepted, he would have yielded to his youthful thirst for power; his refusal underlines his moral and ethical developments and enables him to die believing he has made the right choice:

   and you divine who sat there dead
   Under his foot the badge: still, Palma said,
   A triumph lingering in the wide eyes
   Wider than some spent swimmer's if he spies
   Help from above in his extreme despair.

   (VI. 616-620)

The running titles accompanying this part of the poem in the 1863 and 1868 editions suggest Browning's emphasis on the nature of Sordello's success: "Or may failure [Sordello's inability to persuade Taurello to support the Guelf cause] here be success also when induced by love? Sordello knows . . . ." (The Poems, p. 1066).
Ah my Sordello, I this once befriend
And speak for you. A Power above him still

Is out of rivalry, which thus he can
Love...

(VI. 592-596)

These pronouns are changed for the 1863 edition to the more intimate "you" which also serves to avoid any doubt that Sordello is the intended "he" or "him":

Ah my Sordello, I this once befriend
And speak for you. Of a Power above you still

Is out of rivalry, which thus you can
Love...

(VI. 590-594)

It is also interesting to note the capitalization in the 1840 edition of "Out-Nature" changed in 1863 to "out-nature": the change makes the term less unnatural, and underlines further the natural, human substance of the "Power."
14 See Book V. 559-560: "... and lo, God's unexpressed/ Will draws above us!" See also Book VI. 777: "cross their coats as for Christ's cause."

15 Even in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, in which the speaker says of the Dissenter's Zion Chapel, "I choose here," it is clear that the choice is made by a speaker, and not by Browning.

16 Browning's digression at the end of Book III, in which he tells an "ancient" story of St. John, is characteristic of Browning's response to Christianity in Sordello. Rather than focus on the promise of resurrection in the Book of Revelation, Browning tells of exile, martyrdom, and the difficulties associated with interpreting revelations to show that "What seems a fiend perchance may prove a saint" (III. 986):

John the Beloved, banished Antioch  
For Patmos, bade collectively his flock  
Farewell but set apart the closing eve  
To comfort some his exile most would grieve  
He knew: a touching spectacle, that house  
In motion to receive him! Xanthus spouseth  
You missed, made panther's meat a month since, but  
Xanthus himself (for 'twas his nephew shut  
'Twixt boards and sawn asunder) Polycarp  
Soft Charicle next year no wheel could warp.  

(III. 989-998)

Amidst this description of soon-to-be-martyred disciples Browning inserts the humourous story of John's mistaken identification of his own image for the devil:

Dead swooned thee, woke  
Anon, heaved sigh, made shift heart broke to gasp  
Get thee behind me Satan!  

(III. 1007-1009)

The implications of this story are many, but in the forefront is the emphasis on John's mission and humanity rather than on the prophecies with which we commonly associate him. One should also note the parallels drawn between John's mission and Christ's: John's gathering of his "flock" the eve before his exile recalls the Last Supper, and his martyred flock experiences various forms of the crucifixion. Finally, John's "Get thee behind me 'Satan" echoes Christ in Luke IV:8, during the temptations in the wilderness.

The digression, then, focuses on the difficulties and travails of Christianity rather than just on prophecy and redemption. It is also meant to be an analogue for the experience of reading Sordello: "What seems a fiend perchance may prove a saint" (III. 986). As
Eleanor Cook points out in Browning's Lyrics: An Exploration (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 36, "Browning is bidding the reader to look at it closely before swooning away in horror."

17 Browning's Pope in The Ring and the Book makes the strongest statement about the awesome responsibilities attached to the freedom of the human will: "Life's business being just the terrible choice (X. 1237).

18 These traditional beliefs have biblical origins. The reference to being "lower laid," for example, is based on the belief that grace and wisdom can be attained through humility. In Proverbs 3:34, it is said that the Lord "giveth grace unto the lowly," and in Proverbs 11:2, it is said that "with the lowly is wisdom."

19 One suspects that behind these images of a mountain, trees, and piercing veils lie the implications of Calvary and the crucifixion, implications which are present in both the 1840 and 1863 editions of the poem. Browning's focus on the difficult rather than just the redemptive implications of the crucifixion places him in the tradition of English Renaissance poets such as Spenser, Donne and Milton.


21 See The Poems, p. 1062.

22 Palma wanted Sordello to support the Ghibellin, hence the Emperor's cause, and the homiletics of the "voice" suggest that the Ghibellins would be the better choice (see chapter III, pp. 128-129).

23 Of course the best example of this is in Browning's "Cleon," published in 1855, in which we see the Greek mind at its zenith, unwittingly considering a principle of the Christianity Cleon rejects at the end of the poem:

I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy

Their doctrine Christianity could be held by no sane man.

(11. 324-353)

The imaginations of men such as Cleon are shown to be ready for the Christian religion which forever alters classicism. Browning affirms the ratiocinative and imaginative processes of Cleon's classical mind, but he does not idealize them, and views them as contributors to the development of Christianity. Browning's representation of the contributions of Hebrew humanism in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is developed from a similar perspective.
Browning's sense of the significance of one's historical predecessors is dealt with similarly in The Ring and the Book. The Pope considers his responsibilities to a long line of his forerunners when deciding what he should do with Guido and Caponsacchi. Childe Roland also considers his historical witnesses: "he hears the names "Of all the lost adventurers" (I. 195), and sees them "ranged along the hill-sides" (I. 199); their presence encourages him, like Joshua, to blow his horn.

Matthew 27:46.

The image of the mandrake, a plant of the potato family, said to resemble man because of its forked root, also suggests Genesis implications. In Genesis 30:14, the mandrake is associated with the story of the difficulties experienced by Rachel because she is incapable of conceiving; after much suffering she finally conceives, and says that "God hath taken away my reproach" (Genesis 30:23). The image recurs in The Song of Solomon, and is associated again with fertility and "pleasant fruits" used to describe the union of Christ and the Church. We can see in Browning's use of biblical allusions an emphasis on human sinfulness, yet also on the organic redemptive processes implied by images of fruit and fertility.

Donne alludes to the mandrake in "Go and Catch a Falling Star," and it is possible that Browning is remembering this. He knew Donne's Songs well enough to set this one to music. It is not surprising that Sordello, a religious poem set in the late-medieval, early-Renaissance period, should contain an image from a Renaissance Christian humanist's poem.

Both the context of this statement and the word "race" suggest that Browning is alluding to Hebrews 12:1: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." The "voice" names for Sordello witnesses such as Moses, Paul, and Hildebrand who have raced before him. Browning similarly refers to "the beginning of the race" in Easter Day, I. 25.


See Bowra, "Dante and Sordello," for a discussion of Browning's use of Dante as a source. Dante and Browning both characterize Sordello as a sinner and a late repentant who is forgiven by a generous and loving God. In Dante's Purgatory Sordello's role is to guide Virgil and Dante to the Valley of the Negligent Rulers, after which Virgil and Dante proceed to Purgatory proper, while Sordello remains. He is not heard from again. Browning does not use these details in Sordello, and is mainly interested in preserving Dante's image of Sordello as a sinner who in some ways redeems himself.

See The Poems, p. 1061.
31 See DeVane's A Browning Handbook, pp. 72-85, for a description of the gestation and writing of Sordello between 1833 and the publication date of 1840.

32 Browning's uncomfortableness with the notion of papal infallibility is reflected in Sordello in his characterization of Hildebrand as strong but "stupid":

see you stand
Buttressed upon his mattock Hildebrand
Of the huge brain-mask welded ply o'er ply
As in a forge: it buries either eye
White and extinct, that stupid brow: teeth clenched,
The neck's tight-corded, too, the chin deep-trenched,
As if a cloud enveloped him while fought
Under it all, grim prizers, thought with thought...

(V. 153-160)

The portrait is honest but sympathetic, and shows admiration for the man's strength and courage, without idealizing his spirituality.


34 Matilda is a figure from Dante's Purgatory who represents the virtuous use of earthly things.

35 Tennyson's poem "The Mystic," in The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: W. W. Norton-and Co., 1972), was published in 1830, and contains a similar description of a poet who is detached from mankind and the earthly confines of the body:

He often lying broad awake, and yet
Remaining from the body, and apart
In intellect and power and will, hath heard
Time flowing in the middle of the night,
And all things creeping to a day of doom.
How could ye know him? Ye were yet within
The narrower circle; he had wellnigh reached
The last, which with a region of white flame,
Pure without heat, into a larger air
Upburning, and an ether of black blue,
Investeth and ingirds all other lives.

(II. 36-46)

It is not being claimed that Browning is alluding specifically to this poem; however, Browning's similar use of conventional images of fire, light, and upward motion to represent the withdrawal from earthly to divine spheres, suggests his response to and evaluation of this kind of poetry and image of a poet.
See Herbert F. Tucker Jr. in Browning's Beginnings, p. 116, for an interesting discussion of the water and sky metaphor in Sordello. He observes on p. 116 that "these metaphors are part of a larger simile, which presumably illustrates the proper and orderly proportioning of body to soul. But the free play of tenor and vehicle ... makes an 'orderly' reading of the larger simile impossible. A reader must discard the dualistic split of body and soul which the simile is ostensibly written to support." It is argued in this thesis that Browning wants his readers to discard the notion of a dualized body and soul, and to replace it with a dynamic image of a related body and soul.

These lines are repeated from the opening of Book VI, II-11-16. Mark Hawthorne, in "Structure Through Repetition," p. 212, notes that the repeated passages in Sordello frame digressions, show transitions, and indicate synchronous events. This one, he argues, synchronizes "The dying Sordello's sophistries ... with Salinguerra's ambitious schemes."


See Browning's "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," published in 1836, for a satiric portrait of a man who self-righteously proclaims his 'election.' The poem is set (1535, and is ostensibly about Antinomians who believed neither good deeds nor evil ones affected the process of divine election. Their founder, John Agricola, believed in justification by faith alone. I agree with C. O. Tracy in "Browning's Heresies," Studies in Philology, 33 (1936), 610-625, that Browning is again using an historical setting to examine and evaluate a contemporary issue: the Calvinist belief in election and justification by faith alone was held by many nineteenth-century Evangelicals.
CHAPTER FOUR
The Making of a Maker-see

what I sing's the fate of such
As find our common nature (overmuch
Despised because restricted or unfit.
To bear the burthen they impose on it)
Cling when they would discard it; craving strength
To leap from the allotted world, at length
'Tis left--they floundering without a term
Each a God's germ, but doomed remain a germ
In unexpanded infancy. . . .

(III. 975-983)

Sordello's inability to respond to a soul "above his soul"
which could "uplift his power" has been shown in the second and third
chapters of this thesis to affect his understanding of the similarities
between secular and divine love, as well as his relationships with
Palma and God; it also affects his understanding of the potential of
poetry, and of the dynamics of the relationships between God, the poet,
and the poet's audience. With poetry, as with secular and divine
love, Sordello's tendency to polarize issues, rather than to imagine
an organic and sustaining sense of process between them, results in
unproductive tensions. In his relationship with Palma, for example,
Sordello is unable to see that secular love could combine and affirm
in a reciprocal way the physical and spiritual dimensions of human
love; similarly, he cannot imagine a God who loves, supports, and makes
sacrifices for human beings who are free to become God-like through
freely-willed imitations of such love. Rather, Sordello believes in

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an omnipotent God who elects certain individuals to positions of privilege or suffering, and leaves the rest to fend for themselves.

It is this same omnipotent and willful God Sordello believes has determined his election to the office of poet; and, typically, Sordello vacillates between an overreliance on and a lack of faith in the inspiration of God. The result is that Sordello's sensitivity and imagination are not tasked enough by his own will to develop their full potential, and Sordello, unlike the narrator of the poem, is therefore unable to write anything comparable to Sordello. An evaluation of the contrasts between these developing poets, in relation to Browning's use of an Italian Renaissance setting, forms the substance of this final chapter which evaluates Browning's response to poetry in the 1830's primarily as it is reflected in Sordello.

It has long been agreed among readers of Sordello that in it Browning is mainly concerned with poets and functions of poetry, and that it is a kind of youthful poetic manifesto which marks a significant stage in Browning's development as a poet. The poem is generally discussed as the culminating point in a trio of early major poems including Pauline and Paracelsus; Sordello is thought to be more objective and dramatic than these predecessors, and therefore to be characteristic of Browning's thoughts about poetry in subsequent, more mature poetry. In conjunction with Browning's developing objectivity, however, one can see an increasingly sophisticated response to the role of poets and the function of poetry; as Thomas J. Collins observes, "Sordello is the most objective of Browning's three major early works, but paradoxically, it is also the most revealing. . . ."
Readers have also suggested that the poem, in addition to its germane images of poets and poetry, occupies an historically unique point of transition between Romantic and Victorian poetry. This position led Lionel Stevenson to hail Sordello as "The Key Poem of the Victorian Age," and Michael Yetman to propose that this same "shift might be described as a movement away from the Promethean saviour in poetry and toward the Victorian sage: and it is a shift that parallels Browning's own movement of mind--and that of his entire generation--during the 1830's." Yetman's reference to Browning's "own movement of mind" is of course pointing to Browning's youthful adulation of the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley; Yetman's argument is that Browning in Sordello "exorcises" himself from the influence of Shelley.

These critics have contributed imaginative and informed readings of Sordello; best of all, their work is attracting readers who had been previously reluctant to deal with a poem the effects of which are compared, even by its own narrator, to those of civet and musk-pods. The choice of imagery implies that Browning knew full well he was charting unfamiliar ground in poetry, and in the concluding lines of Sordello, the narrator playfully tests his readers' responses to the poem:

friends be frank: ye smuff
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. 881-888)
References to the "ache" and "after-gust" which are said to accompany the reading of Sordello accord with the arguments of Stevenson and Yetman that Browning is consciously departing from certain aspects of Romantic poetry, especially those which could be compared to roses. The narrator appears to be discriminating here, albeit in an unsophisticated way, between kinds of poetry; further discriminations and comparisons are developed in detail elsewhere in Sordello, and in ways more serious and refined than these concluding rose and musk-pod images suggest. Related ideas about poets and poetry are expressed by Browning in a letter to Elizabeth, and in the "Essay on Shelley" written in 1851 to introduce a collection of letters thought to be written by Shelley. What Sordello, the letter to Elizabeth, and the "Essay" reflect is a sustained concern with the complexities of poetic theory and with traditions of poetry; it will be shown that Browning's representations in Sordello of views about poets, poetry, and creativity, establish basic principles which are reaffirmed and elaborated in, for example, the letter to Elizabeth, the "Essay," Men and Women, and The Ring and the Book.

In Sordello, the letter, and the "Essay" Browning uses a pattern of comparing two kinds of poets; for example, in Sordello sustained comparisons are drawn between Sordello and the narrator. Similarly, in the letter to Elizabeth he compares her poetry with his own, and in the "Essay" he compares subjective with objective poets. It is clear, however, in these and other works of Browning that he is not insisting, rigidly, that there are only two kinds of poets, for example, subjective or objective, or hence that poets can only be one or the other. This is apparent in Sordello, in which both Sordello and the
narrator demonstrate a sense of the differences between, and combina-
tions of, subjective and objective poetic faculties. This does not
imply that Browning is confused and contradictory about kinds of
poets; rather, such combinations within and between characters indi-
cate the variety of choices open to a poet, depending on his purposes
and subjects, and also the difficulty of isolating terms, in prose,
that will accommodate the complexities of the issues involved. While
the prose helps to indicate in general Browning's thoughts about poets
and poetry, and also his tendency to compare one kind of poetry with
another, the poetry itself allows for greater subtlety and shaping of
these thoughts. Browning's poems about art, more than his prose, lend
themselves to dynamic and compelling representations of kinds of poets
and poetry, and to the intricate range of possibilities within individual
poets.

Both the prose and poetry reflect a detached, objective, and
inquisitive response to kinds of poets and poetry that is not intended
to elevate Browning's poetry above the others; for example, in the
"Essay" he points out that "it would be idle to inquire, of these two
kinds of poetic faculty in operation [subjective and objective],
which is the higher or even rarer endowment" (p. 1003). Browning's
objectivity can also be discerned throughout Sordello, in which
Sordello's inability to fulfill himself as a poet is due to a failure
of his will rather than to the type of poet he is. Similarly, the
narrator's successful completion of Sordello is attributed to the
dynamic and reciprocal operations of the human will and divine grace
which activate and sustain his imagination, rather than to the kind of
poet he is.
In the frequently quoted letter to Elizabeth, Browning compares her poetry with his, and suggests some comparisons he later makes in the "Essay" between subjective and objective poets:

you do what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, 'you,'—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me. . . .

Elizabeth is said to utter truths symbolized by "pure white light" but Browning's truths are broken into "prismatic hues." The difference, however, is one of technique rather than of perception: Browning fears the "white light, even if it is in [him] me..."; the "white light" appears to be something he has, but chooses to use in a discriminating way.

More detailed discriminations are made between kinds of poets in the "Essay" written to introduce the Shelley letters in which he compares subjective with objective poetic faculties. The subjective poet is described as a "seer" who struggles to embody in his poetry "not what man sees, but what God sees,—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand..." (p. 1002). Browning goes on to say that the "subjective poet, whose study has been himself," seeks divine truth in his own soul which is "that nearest reflex of that absolute mind..." (p. 1003). In this, the subjective poet differs from the objective poet, described as a "fashioner," who focuses in his poetry on the "doings of men" as well as on perceived truths, and who writes "dramatic poetry." 8

Browning is careful to point out that poets tend to exhibit qualities of both subjective and objective faculties: "running in of
the one faculty upon the other is, of course, the ordinary circumstance" since "rarely it happens that either is found so decidedly prominent and superior as to be pronounced comparatively pure. . . ."

(p. 1003). Even more rare, he says, would be the poet who could evolve the "perfect shield" of these faculties:

while of the perfect shield, with the gold and silver side set up for all comers to challenge, there has been yet no instance . . .

(p. 1003).

These excerpts from the letter and "Essay" imply that Browning perceived himself as one capable and desirous of combining in varying degrees, depending on his purposes with particular poems, subjective and objective poetic faculties, yet who was more often than not inclined to write dramatic poetry which indirectly represented the kinds of truths perceived by more subjective poets. His inclinations are evident in titles such as Dramatic Lyrics, Dramatic Romances, and Dramatis Personae, in his plays, in his dramatic monologues, and in the vast array of characters which people the Browning canon. This is not to suggest, however, that he was incapable of imagining or experiencing a seer's perceptions, or of representing truth in his poetry; he chose to be dramatic, and hence to reflect truths from a variety of angles and points of view.

The prose excerpts from the letter and "Essay" also underline Browning's admiration for poets such as Elizabeth and Shelley whose poetry was very different from his own; in the letter to Elizabeth he is almost apologetic about the preponderance in his own poetry of "prismatic hues" rather than "pure white light," and he alludes in a
subsequent letter to his goal of writing "R.B. a poem."

Despite this modesty, however, Browning's evolution from the basically Romantic, subjective, and transcendental "seer" characterized in Pauline, to a poet who uses at will the subjective and objective poetic faculties, is constant; the implications of the transition are dramatized most fully in Sordello, which contrasts the more subjective faculties of Sordello, who longs to communicate divinely inspired truths, with the faculties of the narrator, who aspires to be a "Maker-see" able to use both faculties to "impart the gift of seeing to the rest."

The term "Maker-see" itself suggests a blending of the faculties attributed in the later "Essay" to the "fashioner" and "seer"; the term also indicates the kind of relationship the narrator wants to establish with his readers. He wants to make them see, and to "impart the gift of seeing;" his aim is to induce them to participate in the process of creation and to encourage them to see what a poet sees.

This process, it turns out, is described using the images and metaphors applied elsewhere in the poem to underline the belief that religious experience is a challenging, ongoing search dependent both on the human will and God's grace; to participate in the creation of a poem is to engage in an enlightening, tempering process analogous to acquiring an understanding of God's ways and human nature.

The reader's participation is encouraged in the opening hundred lines of Sordello in which the narrator establishes through vivid descriptions and other means the three-dimensional and therefore more tangible realities of his thirteenth-century setting.
Lo, the Past is hurled
in twain: upthrust, out-staggering on the world,
subsiding into shape, a darkness rears
Its outline, kindles at the core, appears
Verona.

(I, 75-79)

The narrator simultaneously creates and describes this image of Verona for his readers, with a sense of immediacy and motion ensured by the use of present-tense and dramatic verbs such as "out-staggering" and "subsiding." Verona takes shape before the reader's and the poet's eyes as thirteenth-century Italy is re-created. Our poet-narrator has given some thought to the ways through which he could best present his material; for example, he says his story could have been told in an objective, dramatic form

by making speak, myself kept out of view,
The very man as he was wont to do,
And leaving you to say the rest for him.

(I, 16-18)

He decides, however, to establish a more direct, and in some ways subjective relationship between his poem and his readers, advising us that his presence will be discernible:

it seems
Your setders-forth of unexampled themes,
Makers of quite new men, producing them
Had best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem
The wearer's quality, or take his stand
Motley on back and pointing-pole in hand
Beside them; so for once I face ye, friends.

(I, 26-32)

Because his themes are "unexampled," and his men "quite new," the narrator will accompany us, "for once," with "pointing pole in hand." He continues to recede and disappear at will throughout Sordello,
speaking both for himself and for Sordello in a semi-dramatic poem conducive to infinite variations and combinations of the subjective and objective poetic faculties. The narrator's speaking presence as a character in the poem contributes to the fiction of a dialogue with the audience, a fiction which draws us further into the creative process. It also emphasizes the power a poet can have over his readers and characters, a power he likens to that of a god, just before he speaks to us from nineteenth-century Venice:

as a God may glide
Out of the world he fills and leave it mute
A myriad ages as we men compute,
Returning into it without a break,
I' the consciousness! The sleep [Sordello and Palma],
and I awake
O'er the lagune.

(III. 616-621)

The poet, like God, chooses when to fill or leave his created worlds, and can "glide" across a "myriad ages." How he chooses to use these God-like powers of creativity and control is vital to the implications of Sordello and to Browning's perceptions of the poet's office; the narrator leads us to believe that he views the poet's office quite differently from others in the nineteenth century, and his attitudes are similar to Browning's.

The scintillating promise of "unexampled themes" and "quite new men" prepares the reader for departures from established nineteenth-century conventions, but such departures turn out to be less radical than one might expect, and to have connections with traditions of Christian-humanist poetry most commonly associated with English Renaissance poetry. In Sordello Browning reanimates English Renaissance principles of poetry in ways that are compatible with nineteenth-
century concerns; for example, the poem reflects the nineteenth-century fascination with Renaissance culture and history. He is particularly concerned, however, with the implications of this fascination for a nineteenth-century poet in the process of establishing the function of poetry, a concern which is expressed through several themes in Sordello. The poem reflects a detailed, sensitive, and original exploration of the psychology of poets and of the poetic process, an exploration which includes representations of the nature and degree of poetic inspiration, of the special relationship between poets and God, and of a poet's response to his God-like powers. Browning is equally concerned with the relationship between a poet and his audience, and with the poet's role as mediator between God and men.

In a way quite untypical of nineteenth century or Italian Renaissance poets, Browning emphasizes a poet's essential humanness and increased responsibilities to God and men, rather than the power and privilege frequently associated with God's elected poets. Browning's sense of a poet's duty has affinities with images of poets commonly associated with the English Renaissance, affinities which are underlined through allusions in the opening lines of the poem.

In the introductory seventy-four lines of Sordello the narrator speaks to his audience and to his "friends," selected poets "Summoned together from the world's four ends" (I. 33) "to see how their successors fare" (I. 49). His invocations include among their most prominent members English representatives from the nineteenth century and the Renaissance--Shelley and Sir Philip Sidney. The narrator's differing responses to these poets point to his response to the traditions they represent, and to his growing recognition of the
tradition to which he belongs and will contribute. That Browning was exploring and choosing among literary traditions is confirmed by John Maynard who shows that Browning was well-read in classical, French, Italian and English literature.\textsuperscript{12} Browning's special interests, according to Maynard, were "primarily in the Elizabethan and seventeenth-century writers," and especially Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne and Milton.\textsuperscript{13}

These readings and interests are reflected in Sordello which, notwithstanding what Maynard refers to as the "special interest" in Elizabethan and seventeenth-century English literature, is set in thirteenth-century Italy. One could argue, of course, that this setting is merely an extension of Browning's eclectic interests, and the product of his familiarity with Italian history and culture, but Browning's motives are more complex, and are related to the nineteenth-century fascination with the Italian Renaissance. In effect, Browning is pointing out some parallels between theories of poetry and images of poets shared by Italian Renaissance poets and English Romantic poets. Not surprisingly, it is the thirteenth-century Italian poet Sordello who typifies the transcendental, Neoplatonic poetry of Dante and Petrarch, and of Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Shelley.\textsuperscript{14} On the other hand, the nineteenth-century narrator, a dramatic poet, has affinities with the poetry of English Renaissance figures such as Sidney, Donne, Shakespeare and Milton. The narrator's predilections are implied by his contrasting responses to Shelley and Sidney in the opening lines of Sordello; Shelley's presence is honoured, but not encouraged:
thou, spirit, come not near
Now,--nor this time desert thy cloudy place
To scare me, thus employed, with that pure face!
I need not fear this audience, I make free
With them, but this is no place for thee!
(I. 61-65)

The worthy Sidney, on the other hand, is not sent away, and the "starry
paladin" of his poetry is honoured and welcomed:

the silver speech
Of Sidney's self, the starry paladin,
Turn intense as a trumpet sounding in
The knights' to tilt--wert thou to hear! What heart
Have I to play my puppets, bear my part
Before these worthies?
(I. 69-74)

That owning chose, respectively, the authors of "A Defence of Poetry"
(1821; published in 1840) 15 and a Defense of Poesy (1595) is eminently
suited to a Victorian poem with a late-medieval, early Renaissance
setting, and suggests Browning's sense of the traditions and theories
of poetry shared by these periods, as well as his affinities with the
Sidneyan, English Renaissance traditions of poetry.

The poetry of Shelley and Sidney can be said to represent the
mainstream of the literature of their periods; Shelley's symbolic
unbinding of Prometheus, and visionary transcendentalism, are
typical of the Romantic imagination. Similarly, Sidney's Defense and
sonnet sequence Astrophel and Stella exemplify the energy, wit, and
Christian-humanist ethics and poetic principles of English poets
responding to the literary and historical challenges of the Renaissance
and Reformation. Although Browning's first major poem, Pauline, indi-
cates his leanings towards the transcendental idealism of Romantic
poets such as Shelley and Coleridge, an idealism which ultimately
resists reconciliation with the realities of human nature and God's ways, subsequent poems, for example Sordello, reflect the idealism and ethics of Christian-humanist poets such as Sidney, Donne, and Milton. The ideals of the latter are tempered by an acceptance of the full realities of the human condition and God's ways, including pain, purgation, and human fallibility, as well as the potential for men to be god-like; these ideals are based on faith in the sustenance of God's providence, and are upheld by admirable characters in Browning's poems. In the revised version of "Saul," for example, published in 1849, the poet David, seeking to ease the despair of King Saul, is able to reconcile human weakness and fallibility with God's love for mankind:

"'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh, that I seek
'In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. 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, for ever: a Hand like this hand,
'Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand! (XVIII, 308-312)

Insights similar to David's regarding God's human divinity and the potential of men, through love, to become divinely human are further elaborated by the Pope in The Ring and the Book:

What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
But just the instance which this tale supplies
Of love without a limit? So is strength,
So is intelligence; then love is so,
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice:
Then is the tale true and God shows complete.
Beyond the tale I reach into the dark,
Feel what I cannot see, and still faith stands:
I can believe this dread machinery
Of sin and sorrow, would confound me else,
Devised,—all pain, at most expenditure
Of pain by Who devised pain,—to evolve
By new machinery in counterpart,
The moral qualities of man--how else?--
To make him love in turn and be beloved,
Creative and self-sacrificing too,
And thus eventually God-like... 
(X. 1366-1381)

It is love, creativity, self-sacrifice, and the "moral qualities" of men which make them God-like, according to Browning's Pope.

One can see Browning in Sordello, particularly through the character of the narrator, establishing basic principles and ethics which are much elaborated in later poems; these same principles and ethics are suggested by the allusions in the introductory lines of the poem to Sidney, and are contrasted with the transcendental idealism of Sordello which in part reflects that of Shelley and poets like him. This thesis is not recommending, however, a rigid equation of Sordello with Shelley; rather, readers should think of Sordello as representing preoccupations in the realm of poets and poetry common to thirteenth- and nineteenth-century transcendentalists who turn from the created world in search of some visionary dream. Sordello's interests in the courtly love and Petrarchan conventions of poetry are not unlike those of Keats, Coleridge, Shelley, or the early Hallam and Tennyson, and Sordello's character is enriched, not diluted, by our associations of him with these periods. He is developed as a paradigm of thirteenth- and nineteenth-century extremes, and again, as in other areas of the poem, his vacillating ideas about the function of poets and their poetry are offset by and contrasted with those of the developing Christian-humanist Victorian poet--the narrator.

The narrator, from the start, has a firmer sense of what he believes to be the function of poetry than does Sordello, partly, it
is implied, because of his nineteenth-century vantage point, and partly because of his familiarity with poets such as Sidney who offer alternatives to the kind of poetry Sordello longs to write. John Maynard discusses some implications of the allusion to Sidney in Sordello, observing that Sidney was a master with whom Browning could partially identify and in whom he could see, honestly admitted and eloquently displayed, the struggle between the desire to realize an ideal as man and writer and the limitations of the natural man. If the terms of Browning's own struggles would not be exactly the same as Sidney's... the sense of debate and of honest inner combat allowed Browning to feel a continuity between his own concerns and Sidney's.16

There are in Sordello some suggestive allusions to Sidney's critical theory in the Defense of Poesy which support the argument in this thesis that Browning is dramatizing and exploring some differences between two kinds of poets; interestingly, Sidney, too, compares two kinds of poets, and makes distinctions on which Browning seems to be drawing.17 It is not the purpose of this chapter, however, to isolate Sidney as the guiding light of Sordello; indeed, the allusions are few though fitting, and seem intended to suggest traditions of poetry admired by Sidney which point back to Scripture and Aristotle, as well as to the Renaissance, and which are different from a school of Platonic-Christian poetry developing over the same period of time.

Sidney elaborates with great wit and aplomb the differences between poets the Romans called vates, prophets or forseers, and those the Greeks and Englishmen have called makers; the aim of poets of the latter school is, in the Aristotelian tradition,"to teach and delight"
through their creations of imitations or fictions. Exactly how they do this is more implied than it is philosophically delineated, but Sidney characterizes poesy as the art of imitation, or figuring forth, of men striving to attain the perfection understood by their erected wits, yet undermined by their infected wills; such imitations are the substance of the golden world of poetry in Sidney's Arcadia and Astrophel and Stella, and the same general statement can be made about Sordello.

Sordello wants to be a vates or forseer privy to perceptions of divinity; the narrator, on the other hand, refers to the best poets as "Makers-see" (III. 928) whose responsibility it is to "Impart the gift of seeing to the rest" (III. 866). Like Sidney, the narrator is reluctant to specify in philosophical terms what poets such as himself "see," the actions and language of Sordello, however, imitate, or figure forth, Sordello's struggle to unify something comparable to his infected will ("His will swayed sickly from side to side" (II. 863)) with the erected wit and will he shows when he defends and defines the role of poets during his attempt to persuade Salinguerra to support the Guelf cause. The narrator's choice of the term "Makers-see" seems to draw on Sidney's description of "makers" who create imitations of human experience, something the narrator does when he writes Sordello. One could also argue that the term "Makers-see" implies a combination of Sidney's forseers and makers; in this way the term "Makers-see" would be similar to the term "perfect shield" devised by Browning in the "Essay" to indicate a blending of subjective and objective poetry. It should be pointed out, however, that these specific terms are not developed and adhered to in a systematic way throughout the Browning.
canon, despite the consistency of Browning's response to poetry; for example, in the "Essay" the subjective poet is described as a "seer" while the objective poet is described as a "fashioner." It is clear, however, that the terms' meanings are similar and that they indicate the direction and some of the substance of Browning's thoughts about poets and poetry. Appropriately, the implications of Browning's terms are best appreciated through the fictions in his poetry, his imitations of the thoughts and actions of poets such as Sordello and the narrator in their endeavours to establish the function of poetry and to write honourable poems.

In Sordello the aim of "Makers-see" is to teach and delight mankind through poetry, and to imitate in poetry the full realities and implications of the mutually sustaining earthly and spiritual dimensions of human experience. One of Browning's goals in Sordello is to reaffirm the power of poetry to fulfill these aims, given a willing audience ("Who will, may hear Sordello's story told"); this goal is complicated by the attitude towards poetry of influential men such as Carlyle who argues in "Signs of the Times" that theirs is an unpoetical and irreligious age, and of utilitarians such as Bentham who had very restricted notions about the usefulness of poetry. Another problem Browning faced was the nineteenth-century tendency to value most highly poets who were vates, and whose poems recorded visionary experiences and beautiful images of idealized characters and events. John Henry Newman, for example, in Poetry with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics, published in 1829, expressed the common notion that the poetical mind is "full of the eternal forms of beauty and perfection; these are its material of thought, its instrument and
medium of observation. . . .19 Similar expectations were voiced by Carlyle in his lecture "The Hero as Poet" which was attended by Browning. Poets are described as vates whose mission is to reveal divine mysteries. The following review of Sordello was written in 1840, and illustrates the expectations of a typical Victorian critic:

we have a high estimate of the aim and function of a poet. . . . He [Browning] has given indications of powers, that . . . might place him in an honourable and beneficent position. The world of the beautiful is not exhausted, the number of poets is not yet made up; there are thousands of manifestations of the good, the true, the lovely, the eternal in man, yet to be revealed.20

Again, we see the belief that poets should reveal only what is "good," "lovely," and "eternal." In addition to establishing the merits of poetry in the light of arguments developed by minds such as these, Browning was responding to certain nineteenth-century notions about a poet's responsibilities, subjects, and forms; in essence, he tries to dispel in Sordello the image of a poet as an isolated, mystical being elected by God to holy office, who is unconcerned with the historical and spiritual experiences and aspirations of men, and who utters only beautifully modulated and divinely inspired truths. Browning's poets in Sordello have fallible yet expanding souls, and seek through their poetry to alleviate and illuminate human suffering, as well as to fulfill their missions of service to God.

The kind of poet being described is of course closer to traditions of English Renaissance humanism than to those of the Italian Renaissance, or of the English Romantic period. One is inclined to ask, then, why the setting of Sordello is not the English Renaissance. It has been the argument of this thesis that Sordello's themes have
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nineteenth century is just as capable of producing fine poets as was the Italian or English Renaissance.

Browning's Sordello alludes to primarily English poets, indicating a desire to focus the attention of readers on the traditions and achievements of English poetry, particularly that of the Renaissance. It would be misleading, however, to create the impression that Browning wanted merely to duplicate the poetic and religious principles of English Renaissance poetry; as he says elsewhere, "poetry, if it is to deserve the name, ought to create—or re-animate something—not merely reproduce raw fact taken from somebody else's book." And indeed, although Browning's poetry reflects, for example, a response to the drama within characters typical of Shakespeare, and the metrical experimentation, colloquialism, casuistry and intellectualism of Donne, his poetry creates within their traditions original and nineteenth-century works of art. Browning in Sordello re-animates Christian humanism in ways that are innovative in comparison with his contemporaries' poetry, but which revitalize traditions and principles he believes to be meaningful for the nineteenth century.

That Browning was innovative in his revitalization of the principles of Christian humanism is one of Sordello's great strengths, but it is one that almost cost him his readership. Sordello's wealth of allusions, intricacy of language, and historical interplay between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries generated an unexpected complexity many preferred to dismiss as confusion. His manipulations of poetic forms and genres conflicted with another of the British public's expectations of poetry: as Isobel Armstrong points out, nineteenth-century readers and critics sought "clarity and simplicity
of style ... and what is common and familiar. 27 Similarly, their
care, with "what the poem should be about ... had little to do
with the artistic qualities of a poem." 28 Such criteria led Browning's
readers to claim that Sordello was impenetrable, but it is much less so
if one is willing to accept its fluidities, and to look for continuities
in terms of associations rather than to insist on conventional treat-
ments of character, genres, or narrative. With the character of
Sordello, for example, Browning has created a man who illustrates some
extreme preoccupations of the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, yet
who is a believable human being rather than an abstraction.

Although he is in the fictional world of Sordello a thirteenth-
century troubadour, the images used to define his character are pre-
dominantly nineteenth-century, and indicate an amalgam of associations
with Romantic responses to poetry. 29 In the beginning of the poem
Sordello exhibits many of the characteristics and concerns of poets
such as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats; towards the end, however, his
attitudes towards poetry as a means through which to serve God and
mankind are closer to those of a Christian-humanist poet. During the
interim his attitudes towards the poet's function, the function and
subjects of poetry, and the poet's relationship with his audience and
God, tend to fluctuate between extremes and are contrasted with those
of the more temperate narrator.

Sordello's affinities with visionary and transcendental schools
of poetry which typify some of the extremes of the Italian Renaissance
and Romantic periods are not intended merely to repudiate these
traditions: his affinities should be viewed instead in relation to
Browning's sense of developing traditions in the history of art and
poetry, and of imaginative modulations of these traditions. These modulations encourage and challenge the originality of artists; they also prevent artists from lapsing into the production of monotonous and stagnant works such as those of "Pictor Ignotus" who persists in his painting of "endless cloisters and eternál aisles/ With the same series, Virgin, Babe and Saint..." (II. 59-60). This is a principle to which Browning returns in the "Essay" as he explains historical changes and progressions between types of poetry. He points out that when innovations in poetry become "the straw of last year's harvest" another poet starts "getting at new substance by breaking up the assumed wholes..." (p. 1004) in a process that will repeat itself, not in terms of endless cycles, but in terms of a "mighty ladder" the last step of which is undefined, but towards which poets throughout history are climbing.

Sordello's Romanticism, viewed in the light of this principle, should not then be interpreted as a condemnation of Romantic poetry; rather, it is indicative of a poetry that has used up its creative energies and is in need of the process of "getting at new substances by breaking up the assumed wholes." Browning suggests through his comparisons of Sordello with the narrator that the time has arrived for new directions in poetry, for "New structure from the ancient" (V. 626).

Sordello's Romanticism is challenged early in Book I which contrasts the ravages of the Guelf-Ghibellin conflict with Sordello's youthful reveries in the "drowsy Paradise" (I. 636) of Goito. The isolated, idyllic environment contributes to the growth of a typically Wordsworthian and sensitive imagination and soul. Like Wordsworth and
Keats, Sordello communes with nature and physical objects such as the Caryatide sculptures: in his reveries he fancies that "the poppy felt with him" (I. 719), and that his prayers for the statues lessen the burden of their sin. This capacity for sympathizing with external objects is of course reminiscent of what Keats describes as negative capability.

Sordello's idyllic youth is viewed from the perspective of the narrator who seems at first to alternate between awe and suspicion yet later becomes more tolerant and humane in his response to Sordello. His attitude is tempered by the process of creating Sordello and is exemplary of the meliorating effect poetry can have on the human mind and imagination. Early in the poem the narrator groups Sordello with visionary poets who are inspired by and are privileged to see God:

> a touch divine--
> And the scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod:
> Visibly through his garden walketh God.

(I. 508-510)

The narrator soon shows his distress, however, over poets who seek only to be absorbed in such visionary dreams, and who believe themselves to be unconnected with human realities and experiences which are not of a mystical nature. Such poets, he says, are "Thrusting in time eternity's concern" (I. 574) rather than seeking to integrate and to use creatively a life on earth through which one merits eternity. The narrator is equally concerned about a belief held by such poets that their wills are superior to those of less poetical mortals, and that they, by virtue of their visions, will somehow redeem mankind. He questions the beliefs of these poets as follows:
Thou hast
Life, then--wilt challenge life for us: thy race
Is vindicated so, obtains its place
In thy ascent, the first of us; whom we
May follow, to the meanest, finally,
With our more bounded wills?

(I. 555-560)

The question mark points to the narrator's genuine problems with the
validity of this idea, which contravenes his sense of the freedom of
individual wills, and of the need for individuals to contribute to
their own redemption. The notion that poets vindicate mankind through
their mystical ascents also conflicts with the narrator's sense that
poets are essentially human and fallible, and possess wills that have
neither more nor less potential for redemption than those of other men.
He becomes less and less patient with his thoughts about such poets,
with whom he is classing Sordello, and who are described as seeking
cloistered, self-indulgent visions which conflict with the narrator's
image of the poet as one who should serve God and mankind. Sordello
is thus imagined in rather unflattering terms as being

Like the great palmer-worm that strips the trees,
Eats the life out of every luscious plant,
And when September finds them sere or scant
Puts forth two winglets, alters quite,
And hies him after some unforeseen delight,
So fed Sordello.

(I. 641-645)

Browning's choice of the "palmer-worm" for this simile is ironic and
appropriate. The word "palmer" anticipates in the poem Browning's
characterization of Palma, and the implications of her name which
associate her actions with Christ-like gestures of service and sacri-
ifice (see Chapter Two, pp. 102-103). Similarly, the word "palmer" is
frequently used to describe a pilgrim who has returned from the Holy
Land with palm leaves. One is also expected to associate palms with the crucified and resurrected Christ. Sordello's activities here are inverse of Palma's, a pilgrim's or Christ's.

Our image of Sordello is further deflated when his fanciful creations are compared to those of a spider making webs:

As the adventurous spider, making light
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,
From barbican to battlement; so flung
Fantasies forth and in their centre swung
Our architect: the breezy morning fresh
Above, and merry; all his waving mesh
Laughing with lucid dew-drops rainbow-edged.
(I. 674-680)

The narrator is distressed by Sordello's lack of human concern, pursuit of pleasure, and willingness simply to weave pretty fantasies. Our narrator is charitable enough to imagine, however, that Sordello has been "Fenced about/ From most that nurtures judgment, care and pain" (I. 685-686) and knows that it is not the way of the world to leave innocence untested in paradise; while Sordello muses, we are told of "archers" climbing with "clinking step the northern stair" (I. 670) as the world of experience begins closing in on Sordello. He, in turn, is beginning to long for human contact with a "Daphne" and "the veritable business of mankind" (I. 1027). In particular, he longs for an audience of sympathizers whose "stifled thoughts" he can articulate. Poets like Sordello are said by the narrator to

look forth tremulously to ascertain
If others judge their claims not urged in vain,
--will say for them their stifled thoughts aloud.
So, they must ever live before a crowd.
(I. 759-765)
Sordello's entrance into the world of Mantua provides a heady mixture of experiences for our hitherto cloistered dreamer: he finds love and a vocation in a single afternoon when he happens upon Palma's court of love engaged in a poetry contest. Before the crowd has finished applauding Eglamor, its favourite Jongleur, Sordello has leapt to his side, singing

the true lay with the true end,
Taking the other's names and time and place
For his. On flew the song, a giddy race,
After the flying story; word made leap
Out word; rhyme--rhyme; the lay could barely keep
Pace with the action visibly rushing past:
Both ended.

(II. 85-91)

The words "flying," "race," and "rushing" underline our sense of the poem as an inspired "fit/ Of rapture" (II. 143-144), and for his performance Sordello is crowned by Palma with her scarf in the first of a sequence of "crowning" episodes. His crown is a gift bestowed rather than earned, through an act of will; the composition of this lay has been on the whole without effort, and was to a certain extent borrowed from "the other's names and time and place." Nevertheless, Sordello begins to think more seriously about the nature of a poet, about a poet's relationship with his audience and God, and about suitable subjects for poetry. The narrator, too, is thinking about these things, and is beginning to be less extreme in his evaluations of Sordello's development.

Sordello views poets and their poetry as being separate from and unrelated to the experiences of ordinary men; he presumes that as God's elect he is the soul to his audience's body and "needs must be
a God to such" (II. 164). He believes his poetic faculties alone merit
adulation and that he must contribute only "Song, not Deeds" (II. 448):

So, range my soul! Who by self-consciousness
The last drop of all beauty dost express--
The grace of seeing grace, a quintessence
For thee: but for the world, that can dispense
Wonder on men, themselves that wonder--make
A shift to love at second hand and take
Those for its idols, who but idolize
Themselves,--that loves the soul as strong, as wise
Whose love is Strength, is Wisdom,--such shall bow
Surely in unexampled worship now,
Discerning me!

(II. 411-421)

According to Sordello, he is worthy of "unexampled worship" not because
he earns it in any way, but simply because of his "self-consciousness"
and ability to perceive beauty; his vanity is denounced by the narrator
who suggests that this "Dear monarch" (II. 421) "Strangle some day with
a cross olive-stone" (II. 429), and who holds the classic English
Renaissance view that poets must themselves be virtuous and honourable.
This view is nowhere more eloquently or concretely stated than in
Milton's Apology for Smectymnus: 31

he who would not be frustrate of his hope to
write well hereafter in laudable things, ought
himself to be a true poem, that is, a composi-
tion and pattern of the best and honourablest
things--not presuming to sing high praises of
heroic men or famous cities, unless he have in
himself the experience and the practice of all
that which is praiseworthy. 32

Milton's image of a poet as a "true poem" who possesses both the
"experience" and "practice of all that which is praiseworthy" indi-
cates a view of poets and poetry that is a world apart from Sordello's
image of himself as a vates existing to be worshipped and who is
unsullied by the realities of human experience. The narrator's disapproval of Sordello's notion contributes to his alignment of Sordello with Eglamor, the poet defeated by Sordello at Palma's court of love who represents several radical views of poets and poetry.

Eglamor is a subjective poet of the Wits school who equates poetry with divine truths intended to please an audience, and who seems to epitomize everything Renaissance rationalists and nineteenth-century utilitarians equated with poets and poetry. The narrator observes that

For him [Eglamor] indeed was Maddo's notion right
And verse a temple-worship vague and vast,
A ceremony that withdrew the last
Opposing bolt, looped back the lingering veil
Which hid the holy place...

(II. 202-206)

Naddo and Eglamor associate poetry with mysterious ceremonies and holy places, visions behind the "veil" which ordinary men cannot see. They believe poetry should "ease/ All pain, remove all trouble" (II. 214-215), and Eglamor's poetry is characterized by its "ambrosial glances, dulcet tones" (I. 916). Even more than Sordello, Eglamor believes that his "calling" identifies him as "a man apart/ From men" (II. 226-227); ironically, however, he is so dependent on his audience for his existence that he literally expires when its fickle loyalties are transferred to Sordello:

Our poet lost his purpose, lost his rank,
His life--to that it came.

(II. 247-248)

Eglamor's views are very different from those of the narrator who is more interested in fulfilling his god-like responsibility by creating
difficult, sometimes painful poems which challenge, test, and reward readers, than in amusing them with "dulcet tones," the narrator is much less interested in creating a poetry that will be popular than is Eglasam. Sordello's aims in the beginning tend to lie between the extremes represented by Eglasam and the narrator, although towards the end he is moving towards the narrator's views.

Eglasam, however, is Sordello's first model of what a poet should be, and Sordello initially strives to be like him. For example, during the poetry contest at which he defeats Eglasam, Sordello simply takes over the former's names and places, mechanically reproducing much of the lay rather than creating his own. Like Eglasam, Sordello uses poetry as a means of pleasing his audience, a method much-approved by Naddo, "busiest of the tribe/ Of genius-haunters" (II. 838-839) who is an exponent of the rationalist, utilitarian attitudes towards poetry mentioned in the above paragraph. Naddo quickly and pragmatically transfers his loyalties from the defeated Eglasam to the newly-crowned Sordello, and expresses opinions of poets and poetry typified by utilitarian critics such as John Stuart Mill. Readers of Sordello have rightly associated Naddo's character as a personification of questionable literary critics. Naddo is of the opinion that poets should not be moral, historical, or philosophical; instead, he urges them to focus on feelings, to "Build on the human heart" (II. 815). When Sordello considers historical and philosophical subjects for his poetry, he is chastized by Naddo:
In January and November of 1833, Mill published in the Monthly Repository two essays titled "What is Poetry" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry," in which he argued that the object of poetry was to act on the emotions; similarly, poetry was defined in "The Two Kinds of Poetry" as "the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself," a statement which draws upon Wordsworth's definition of poetry as a spontaneous overflow of feeling. Mill argues in "What is Poetry" that when poets try to influence the thoughts and minds of their audience, they are no longer writing poetry. An affinity between Naddo and Mill is further suggested by the consistent association of the former with the word "Genius;" for example, in Book 1 the narrator says in an aside to Naddo: "Eat fern-seed/ And peer beside us and report indeed/ If (your word) Genius dawned. . . ." (I. 707-709). Interestingly, in 1832 Mill published an essay "On Genius" in which he attempts to define poetic genius in utilitarian terms. It is quite likely that Browning was particularly sensitive to the words of Mill; it was Mill, after all, who wrote in a review copy of Pauline, subsequently received by Browning, that the "writer seems to be possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being." More important than a direct equation of Mill with Naddo, however, is the recognition
that Naddo's limited view of poets as unphilosophical and unhistorical entertainers coincides with that of utilitarians such as Mill, and was a view Browning was attempting to offset with his philosophical and historical poem.

Naddo repeatedly tells Sordello he is "a bard . . . And no philosopher" (II. 805-806) and urges him to cater to the taste of that "herd's stupid sterling happiness" (II. 517). In keeping with the view that poetry is only entertainment, Naddo encourages Sordello to sing for the warrior Salinguerra; Sordello's refusal underlines his developing belief that the function of poetry goes well beyond the level of entertainment, and that poetry can involve ethics, religion, history and philosophy.

The territorial dispute among poets, historians and philosophers was not new to the nineteenth century; similar issues are addressed in Aristotle's Poetics, some theories of which are alluded to elsewhere in Sordello, and also in Sidney's Defense. Sidneian, too, alludes to Aristotle, and both of them point out that poets are the monarchs among historians and philosophers. Sidney's argument is that historians are too tied to the particular, and philosophers to the abstract, to move mankind from wicked to virtuous behaviour in the ways that poetry can; neither history nor philosophy are thought to have the ability to "teach and delight" by imitating the universal truths of human nature to erect the wits of mankind so they can best appreciate the significance of human experience. It is these classical and English Renaissance views to which Sordello ultimately aspires, and which the narrator in Book III demonstrates, but Sordello must struggle and fall several times before he realizes their implications.
Although he resists the limitations of Naddo's response to poetry, his idealistic expectations of himself, his audience, and language lead him to abandon poetry as a means of effecting the happiness of mankind, and to pursue politics as the means of fulfilling his goals. Because Sordello believes himself to be a god, he imagines himself to have an omnipotent relationship with mankind. His belief that God is powerful, mysterious, and interventionist, rather than loving and equitable, leads him to view mankind as something created for his use; it is not surprising, then, that he uses poetry mainly to elicit praise from his audience, and becomes frustrated when it becomes critical and demanding. To appeal to popular taste, he tries to create characters which go beyond the "unreal pageantry" (II. 576) of virtues and vices. Sordello's attempts are frustrated, however, by the stubborn refusal of language to conform to his idealized expectations that it will both mirror his perceptions and communicate them perfectly to his audience. He faces the Romantic dilemma voiced by Shelley in his Defence that "the mind in creation is as a fading coal" in his struggle with the limitations of language:

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

(II. 602-605)

Easily defeated, Sordello refuses to rise to the challenge of language or poetry, and abdicates his poet's throne by throwing the scarf bestowed on him by Palma into the font. His audience is dismissed as "punny elves" (II. 662) who, if they refuse to praise him for his efforts, are useless to him: "Wherefore then/ Continue, make believe to find in
men/ A use he found not?" (II. 667-669). In so doing, Sordello is dismissing not only his audience and mankind, but also the potential of poetry and of a poet's will. He cannot yet imagine a poetry that does anything more than reflect a poet's visionary dreams or that could "teach and delight" an audience through its imitations of human experience; nor does he imagine that the responsibilities of a poet could lie beyond those of immediately pleasing an audience with a popular poetry that placed no demands on its readers. Instead, he decides to repudiate poetry in favor of politics; and in this way to "be king again" (II. 1041); it is quite typical of his vacillating nature that although he earlier embraced poetry and his will as the means through which to "save" mankind, he now rejects them to pursue a more naturalistic approach. Poetry, his body, and his will, because fallible and imperfect, are cast aside:

The Body, the Machine for Acting Will
Had been at the commencement proved unfit;
That for Reflecting, Demonstrating it,
Mankind--no fitter: Was the Will Itself
In fault?

(II. 1028-1037)

The wills and bodies of poets and "Mankind" alike are dismissed as unfit for the kind of poetry Sordello longs to write, and cannot; he continues to search, however, for a way to perfect both himself and Mankind, which is why he attempts to fulfill himself through political action.

It is largely Palma's influence which awakens or instills the humanitarian aims of Sordello, and encourages him by example to fulfill himself by working on behalf of others; his political aims, however, are typically staggering in scope: he seeks through politics to
"rescind/ The ignominious exile of mankind" (III: 579-580). It is fitting that at this turning point in the poem, when Sordello has abandoned poetry for what he believes are more useful methods of benefitting mankind, the narrator appears in nineteenth-century Venice to reaffirm his and the readers' sense of what poetry can and should do. As Michael Mason points out, the "digression is a dense reservoir of clues to the meaning and application of the rest of the poem," 40 and its ideas about poets and poetry approximate closely those of Browning himself. 41

What is described in the digression, among other things, are the architectural ruins and human misery which heighten the unfulfilled promises of the Italian Renaissance and men such as Sordello, and the tempered, human response of a young English poet. The narrator is able to affirm the poet's role in a world in which human suffering and evil seem predominant; he thereby justifies his choice of subject matter (Sordello; the Guelf-Ghibellin conflict) and his challenging of his audience with a difficult, demanding poem which contains images of evil and in which he tells truths obliquely. The digression, then, attempts to clarify the narrator's developing views about poets and poetry, views which accord with those of Sidney and which anticipate those in The Ring and the Book.

In particular, the narrator is compelled to explain why his poem is different from the visionary norm, which is why he assures us that his "madrigal" is comparable to "the mugwort that conceals a dew-drop safe" (III: 813). His intention, however, is not to deny vates their truths; rather, he wants to persuade readers not to dismiss as unpoptical a poetry that imitates the psychology, the actions, and the
striving for spiritual confirmation of men such as Sordello who try to comprehend the implications of human existence. One of the reasons Sordello abandons poetry for politics is that he is frustrated by his inability to be a prophet in the tradition of St. John's apocalyptic angel:

But the complete Sordello, Man and Bard,  
John's cloud-girt angel, this foot on the land,  
That on the sea, with open book in his hand  
A bitter-sweetling of a book—was gone.  

(Il. 705-708)

Sordello believes that "Song" is the reflection through the poet of divinely inspired truths such as those of the apocalyptic angel, and that the poet is therefore more of an instrument than he is a person who must struggle to find the words to express divine or human inspirations. His belief is expressed most clearly in the following description of the poetic process:

But he would give and take on Song's one point:  
Like some huge throbbing-stone that, poised a-joint,  
Sounds to affect on its basaltic bed  
Must sue in just one accent: tempests shed  
Thunder, and raves the landstorm.  

(Il. 459-464)

This typically Coleridgean and Shelleyan description (see note 29) of the situation of poets who must, "Like some huge throbbing-stone," wait for the "tempests" and "Thunder" of divine inspiration partially explains Sordello's reluctance to wait further for a divine Muse which seems to have deserted him—"as difficult obtain a Muse/ In short, as be Apollo..." (Il. 613-614)—or to struggle further with language. A poet with these beliefs is helpless when inspiration is not forthcoming; such is the case with Sordello.
His problems are increased by his notion that the content of poetry should be immediately transforming and apocalyptic, a notion which radically limits one's choice of subjects. Similarly, when he does write about human actions he is drawn to the extremes of "Saints" and "Sinners" (II. 540-541), and has difficulty creating realistic characters who range between these extremes.

The narrator indirectly offsets these tendencies and attitudes towards poetry in the digression in Book III: he chooses both his muse and poetic subjects; he at will glides in and out of his poem "as a God may glide/ Out of the world he fills" (III. 616-617); and he creates full-blooded characters who are fallible yet who show their potential to be God-like. Much of the narrator's digression is intended to vindicate a poetry which responds to and imitates a wide spectrum of human behaviour and aspirations, and which attempts to explain divine truths which the human mind, including a poet's, can only partially understand.

This partial understanding is, of course, to be linked with the implications of original sin discussed in Chapter III, and which the narrator considers when faced with the human suffering seen in "Venice, a type/ Of Life." The narrator is shown to be coming to terms with the implications for poets and their audiences of the presence of "Evil, the scheme by which, thro' Ignorance,/ Good labours to exist" (III. 801-802). In his search for evidence of goodness and happiness in Venice he urges himself to recognize that pain and God's challenging ways mark the human condition, and that to be God-like and creative he must accept and imitate these things in his poems, rather than withdraw into visionary dreams which his readers cannot hope to
share. Neither men nor poets should be encouraged to refuse to respond to the implications of God's ways and human suffering, as the following passage indicates:

as good you sought
To spare me the Piazza's slippery stone,
Or stay me thrid her canals alone,
As hinder Life what seems the single good
Sole purpose, one thing to be understood
Of Life. . . .

(III. 724-729)

In this 1840 version of the poem the "Sole purpose" of life mentioned above can only be inferred, and appears to involve a dynamic search for and participation in the vicissitudes of human life, rather than a shrinking from "the Piazza's slippery stone," in attempts to redeem one's fallen nature. These ideas are elaborated in the 1863 version of the poem:

as good you sought
To spare me the Piazza's slippery stone
Or keep me to the unchoked canals alone,
As hinder Life the evil with the good
Which makes up living, rightly understood.

(III. 717-730)

In the 1863 version "living" requires a literal and metaphorical journey through choked as well as "unchoked canals," and walking on "the Piazza's slippery stones," since God's challenging ways and the freedom of an individual's will allow men to choose between what is right and wrong. The narrator, unlike Sordello, does not expect the immediate eradication of evil, or contra-historical perfecting of his race which would deny men the opportunity to contribute towards the redemption of mankind.
These are the kinds of truths the narrator, as a "Maker-see," resolves to reflect in his poetry, and from which Sordello has repeatedly tried to escape in his demands that poetry, God, and finally political action should immediately perfect, and make happy, mankind. To do this would deny an individual's will, the processes of history, and God's provision of ways through which men and poets could become God-like, but these are principles Sordello has difficulty accepting; he prefers to avoid the slippery stones and the deeper implications of God's tolerance of pain and evil considered by the Pope in The Ring and the Book, who believes pain has been "Devised—all pain, at most expenditure/ Of pain by who devised pain... (X. 1376-1377). The belief that human pain is more painful to God than to human beings is a principle less evident in Sordello; it is a principle related to Browning's own developing religious convictions and understanding of God's ways.

In keeping with the narrator's acceptance of the challenges and opportunities for men and poets implied by God's creation of freely-willed and fallible, rather than fettered and perfect creatures, are his choices of a muse and of poetic subjects. The mere fact that he believes he is free to choose underlines a fundamental difference between the narrator and Sordello since the latter tends to view himself as a medium controlled by a will beyond his own. The narrator draws our attention to this when he asks

Who's adorable
Enough reclaim a--no Sordello's Will
Alack!—be queen to me?

(III. 682-684)
This is not to say, however, that the narrator does not believe he has been elected by divine will to the poet's office; indeed, on this issue he is in agreement with Sordello: "God . . . selects our yoke/ Sordello! as your poetship may find . . . " (III. 779-781).

Where they differ is in the concept of the need to extend freely the "intermediate will" discussed in Chapter Three to merge with God's election or grace; to do so is to be sustained by an "out-soul," and to have one's powers uplifted. Because Sordello does not understand or believe this, and claims his "Will was fettered" (III. 190), he remains unable to fulfill himself through poetry, politics or love.42

The narrator chooses for his muse not an idealized, goddess-like beauty; rather, he chooses a peasant resembling a "Sad disheveled ghost" (III. 700) who becomes for him a symbol of the men he is destined to serve, and whose "care-bit erased/ Broken-up" beauty (III. 745-746) inspires and refreshes him:

   as I stopped my task awhile, the sad
   Disheveled form wherein I put mankind
   To come at times and keep my pact in mind
   Renewed me. . . .

   (III. 968-971)

His "task" and "pact" is to fulfill his mission as a poet by responding to the "yoke" (III. 780) selected for him by God through his creation of poems such as Sordello which reflect his understanding of God's provision of partially understood truths and the implications of pain and human misery. In so doing, he places himself in the tradition of the Christian heroes and founders of the Church described in the "low voice" passage of the poem discussed in Chapter Three; poets, too,
must do their work, and earn their laurels by contributing to the work of mankind throughout history.

This point is illustrated through an intriguing machine metaphor, the implications of which are analogous to the metaphors of vines and chains used in the "low voice" passage. Poets throughout history are said to

construct,
In short, an engine: with a finished one
What it can do is all, nought how 'tis done;
But this of ours yet in probation, dusk
A kernel of strange wheelwork thro' its husk
Grows into shape by quarters and by halves;

We die: which means to say the whole's removed,
Dismounted wheel by wheel that complex gin,
To be set up anew elsewhere, begin
A task indeed but with a clearer clime
Than the murk lodgment of our building-time.

(III. 838-852)

The work of poets is described in terms similar to those used by the "low voice" to describe individual and collective life as an on-going probational and purgational experience during which one struggles to imitate the divinely human suffering and dignity of Christ and subsequent Christian heroes. A poet's life, for example, is imaged as a "probation" or process during which he contributes to the construction of an "engine." Interestingly, a similar process is projected for life in a "clearer clime" which follows one's death: the "engine" is "set up anew" so each poet can begin a new "task." The narrator, however, is not ready for this "clearer clime," his reason being that he has not yet earned the privilege or contributed enough work. In a situation comparable to that of Donne's speaker in "Good Friday, Riding Westward," who has not earned the right to see God's face, the
narrator determines to continue writing poems on earth, saying to those who would do otherwise,

and while thou turnest on thy heel
Pray that I be not busy slitting steel
Or shredding brass upon a virgin shore
Under a cluster of fresh stars, before
I name a tithe the wheels I trust to do!

(III. 855-859)

Unlike poets such as Sordello, who long for a "clearer clime" and would turn their heels on earth, the narrator has a "tithe" to fulfill before going to the "virgin shore;" his responsibility is to "Impart the gift of seeing to the rest . . . ." (III. 866). What he sees and sings, however, is different from what a transcendental poet would describe; the narrator's truths are imitations of the potential and limitations of men such as Sordello who are attempting to understand and restore their infected wills, thereby realizing their god-like potential:

what I sing's the fate of such
As find our common nature (overmuch
Despised because restricted or unfit
To bear the burthen they impose on it)
Cling when they would discard it; craving strength
To leap from the allotted world, at length
'Tis left--they floundering without a term
Each a God's germ, but doomed remain a germ
In unexpanded infancy . . .

(III. 975-983)

The passage describes perfectly the vacillations of Sordello between poet and man, vates and politician, having the potential of a "God's germ" yet remaining in "unexpanded infancy." In particular, the passage indicates the narrator's sensitivity to the plight of men and poets who flinch from bearing their "burthen," who dismiss their "common nature" as being "unfit," and who long "To leap from the
allotted world" into an infinity glimpsed in visionary dreams, yet which they have not earned. These remain a "germ" and in "unexpanded infancy," resisting the dynamic processes of cultivated growth implied by the images "germ" and "infancy." Although Sordello longed to be a god, he found it difficult to accept the responsibilities, tasks and travails; he also found himself incapable of either perceiving or communicating the truths he associated with a vates. Only towards the end does he become aware of alternatives to this quest for mysterious truths, alternatives that are just as deserving of the art of poetry as are the utterances of a vates. He is able to discriminate between kinds of truth and kinds of poetry, and to affirm the partially understood truths of the "Makers-see":

Then Mantua called
Back to his mind how certain bards were thrall'd
--Buds blasted, but of breaths more like perfumes
Than Naddo's staring nosegay's carrion blooms
Could boast---some rose that burnt heart out in sweets,
A spendthrift in the Spring, no summer greets--
Some Dularete, drunk with truths and wine,
Grown bestial dreaming how become divine.
Yet to surmount this obstacle, commence
With the commencement, merits crowning! Hence
Must Truth be casual Truth, elicited
In sparks so mean, at intervals dispread
So rarely, that tis like at no one time
Of the world's story has not Truth, the prime
Of Truth, the very Truth which loosed had hurled
Its course aright, been really in the world
Content the while with some mean spark by dint
Of some chance-blow, the solitary hint
Of buried fire, which, rip its breast, would stream
Skyward!

(VI. 175-194)

The passage underlines Sordello's growing awareness of the inadequacies and inherent dangers of the extremes to which he was drawn as a poet, and his replacement of them with a more temperate response to visionary.
poetry, to the processes of time, to man's fallen nature, and to God's gradual revelations of truth. He realizes, for example, that to lock oneself into, or to become "thrall'd" by "dreaming how become divine," contravenes the reciprocal and natural relations between one's earthly "probation" (III. 841) and the "clearer clime" (III. 851) one hopes to enter when one's time is up. To repudiate this "probation" is to be a bud "blasted" or a "spendthrift in the spring" whom "no summer greets;" in essence, it disrupts the natural order of things. Furthermore, Sordello realizes that to aspire to divinity only through dreams incurs the risk of growing "bestial" and "drunk," anything but "divine."

Finally, Sordello is beginning to understand and accept God's provision of "casual" truths, and to relate them creatively to man's fallen human nature. In his willingness to "commence/ With the commencement," to affirm the "world's story" of Genesis, he begins to come to terms with his own fallibility and that of others; to do so is said to merit "crowning," and to be a way to "surmount this obstacle" of longing for divinity. Because men are fallible, and can only partially understand God's ways and plans, God's truths are shown through sparks and hints of a "buried fire."

Poets are thus provided with an example of the kind of truths they should reflect in their poetry; like God, they can challenge their readers with truths which might be less than perfect revelations perfectly understood, yet which encourage men to use and develop all their faculties in attempts to discern the truth. One is reminded of the assertions of the narrator in The Ring and the Book that "it is the glory and the good of Art,/ That art remains the one way possible/ Of speaking truth. . ." (XII. 838-840), and significantly, that
"Art may tell a truth/ Obliquely" (XII. 855-856).

"Makers-see" poets such as the narrators of The Ring and the Book and Sordello are content to "tell a truth/ Obliquely" by figuring forth in poetry the perceptions and actions of a variety of men and women responding to God's challenging ways, not always successfully, but often with good intentions. Such poets, like God, must deal creatively and charitably with the fallibility of men and women which allows for both weakness and strength; to do so is to celebrate human potential and God's created world while at the same time recognizing the realities of human sinfulness. It is clear that the narrators of these poems, and by implication Browning himself, see many parallels between the writing of a worthy poem and a poet's religious convictions. In a way, the writing of Sordello is imaged as an on-going religious experience or "probation," replete with self-doubts, difficult choices about genres and subjects, and struggles to shape the flux of language. The difficult process, however, serves to temper the poet, a process which it is hoped will be extended to readers willing to meet the challenges presented by Sordello. Both Sordello and the narrator are said to be selected by God to be poets, but they are also shown to be men bearing the burden or yoke of original sin for which they are attempting to atone through the fulfillment of tasks designed to serve mankind and God. Thus, the images used in the concluding books of the poem to characterize the role of the poet become increasingly ethical and religious, and closer to some conventions of English Renaissance humanism.

For example, in the final pages of the digression in Book III, biblical allusions are used to underline the narrator's understanding.
of the ways of God and men. The passage to be discussed alludes to Old Testament figures whose experiences illustrate human fallibility, the immense difficulty of discriminating between truth and deception, and God's challenging, often ironic ways. To give this passage more context, it should be pointed out that the narrator uses it as part of his on-going dialogue with his readers, some of whom are poets who, like Sordello, shrink from the implications of evil and pain. Their argument, he says, is that the "water of life" is, for God, "easy to dispense" (III. 809), and that therefore we should have more of it; the narrator's response is to remind them of original sin, "the centre whence/ Commotion's born" (III. 810-811), and that the experience of pain and the poem in which he explains and represents it, are like, "a mugwort that conceals a dewdrop safe!" (III. 813). Mugworts, the pains of human experience, and the travails and doubts of spiritual aspirations conceal a "dewdrop" of the "water of life." It is the story of Moses smiting the rock in the desert of Zin that is used to illustrate the principles discussed above, along with allusions to Potiphar and the Gibeonites:

Babes, baldheads, stumbled thus far into Zin
The Horrid, getting neither out nor in,
A hungry sun above us, sands among
Our throats, each dromedary lolls a tongue,
Each camel churns a sick and frothy chap,
And you, 'twixt tales of Potiphar's mishap
And sonnets on the earliest ass that spoke,
Remain you wonder any one needs choke
With founts about! Potsherds him, Gibeonites,
While awkwardly enough your Moses smites
The rock though he forego his Promised Land,
Thereby, have Satan claim his carcass, and
Dance, forsooth, Metaphysic Poet . . . ah
Mark ye the dim first oozings? Meribah!
And quaffing at the fount my courage gained.

(III. 815-829)
Although it is the narrator who selects and shapes this remarkably graphic portrait of thirsting "Babes" and camels, and the series of subsequent allusions, their interpretation is left ultimately to readers who "wonder any one needs choke" in the desert of life; the narrator, like God, is dealing out sparks, hints, and challenges rather than unveiling buried fires. This tendency of God's is implied through the allusion to Moses, who was denied the opportunity to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land because he smote the rock out of pride and anger to produce water for the Israelites. It is Moses' fallibility, and the difficulty he has interpreting the words of God, that leads to his punishment. His "carcass," however, is not yet claimed by Satan (who will never have his soul) since God is implied to be patient and loving, and to have designed this challenge to induce the tempering and growth of Moses' soul. Recognition of this, says the narrator, should mark the "dim first oozings" of increased understanding, or, of the "water of life" which the poet-narrator is "quaffing at the fount" as he writes his poem. Similar themes are implied by the contrasting stories of Potiphar and the Gibeonites; Potiphar's trust in Joseph disintegrated when tested against the lies of his wife whom he assumed was telling the truth when in reality she was lying. The Gibeonites, on the other hand, deceived Joshua with their lies and costumes. What the allusions to these stories illustrate, besides the difficulty of discerning truth, is that God both challenges and punishes fallen humanity, including "elect" prophets, to induce creative human actions that can cure their infected wills. These stories also imply the corollaries of God's grace, love, justice, and mercy; Joseph, for example, was protected by God during his
imprisonment at the hands of Potiphar, and the Gibeonites were allowed to live, albeit as servants. Readers are encouraged to think about implications of these stories which go beyond the miracles of rocks which yield water, or asses that speak. Biblical figures and Metaphysic poets alike are allowed and encouraged to quaff at the fountains of God's grace and at the revelations about him to be found in biblical stories.

The poet must "take his own part" in this drama of earthly life, to quote from the running titles added to this section of the poem in 1863, and is urged to create men similar to Moses and Sordello who have expanding souls, and whose thoughts and aspirations reflect "the mood itself" and the "variation's gist" (III. 908, 911). In a further address to his audience the narrator draws attention to his creation of the fallible yet potentially god-like Sordello:

And therefore have I moulded, made anew
A Man, delivered to be turned and tried,
Be angry with or pleased at. On your side
Have ye times, places, actors of your own?
(III. 934-937)

Those who would criticize his god-like creation of "A Man" his audience could be "angry with or pleased at" are asked if they have contributed creations of their own; to have done so is to have praised and imitated the creativity, challenges, and love of God. The love poets are urged to imitate is the love demonstrated by God's creation of men who are free to choose, and the grace extended to those who are fallible and who make less than perfect choices--men like Sordello. Poets are also urged to imitate the service and self-sacrifices made by God's Son which are implied throughout the images used to underline the theme
of religion in Sordello, and which have been explicated in Chapter Three. It is this kind of love which influences the narrator's admiration for "Broken-up" rather than idealized humanity and his writing of a poem about Sordello's "flesh-half's break-up" (VI. 467). Further imitations of this love have been found in the motives and actions of Palma, and in the narrator's response to them; ultimately, even Sordello, through the combined influences of Palma, the "low voice," God's grace, and the experience of his "flesh-half's break-up" resolves to dedicate his services to mankind.

Palma applies her belief in the enriching and sustaining potential of out-souls to her love for Sordello and to her support of the Ghibellin cause; he, in turn, dedicates himself to meliorating the plight of the Guelfs. The images he uses to describe his relationship with the "multitude" underline his acceptance of her out-soul philosophy, and the desire to serve others advocated by Palma, the "low voice," and the narrator:

```
now let the multitude
Include yourself, and the result is new;
Themselves before, the multitude turn you;
This were to live and move and have (in them)
Your being, and secure a diadem
That's to transmit (because no cycle yearns
Beyond itself, but on itself returns)
When the full sphere in wane, the world o'erlaid
Long since with you, shall have in turn obeyed
Some orb still prouder, some display, still
More potent than the last, of human Will...
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(V. 517-527)

The passage is part of Sordello's persuasion of himself to merge his powers, concerns, and ambitions with those of the "multitude," and indicates his changing response to the human will and to the processes of history. He now believes that he can earn a "diadem," not because
he is "elect," but because he can complete himself through actions on behalf of the "multitude." The Christian implications of his belief are underlined by biblical allusions to the words of St. Paul to the Athenians as he urges them to recognize that their "being" can be fulfilled through reciprocal relations with God, their creator: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain of your poets have said, For we are also his offspring" (Acts 17:28). Sordello imagines this kind of relationship with the "multitude," urging himself "to live and move and have (in them)/ Your being. . . ." using a diction that suggests his increasingly Christian-humanist beliefs. In addition to his awakening sense of his present relations with mankind, he perceives his place in mankind's history as one who will "secure" and then "transmit" a "diadem" in accordance with the waxing and waning of the spheres of time as he, and those who follow, continue to obey "Some orb still prouder." To obey is implied to involve a conscious act of "human Will," and each act is predicted to be more "potent" than the last; the image of potency suggests increasing human powers throughout history.

One can see in Sordello's choice of imagery and allusions an amalgam of his responses to Palma and the "low voice;" his desire to link his powers with those of the "multitude" and his images of orbs and spheres echo both the philosophy and imagery of her out-soul passage (explicated in Chapter Two, pp. 92-93). His affirmation of the potency of the "human Will," however, is less tied than Palma's to a sense of divine ordination. It is the homiletics of the "low voice" which are being echoed in Sordello's response to the cumulative
effects of individual and collective wills throughout history; Sordello's soul is indeed awakening.

His developing views are paralleled with a changing response to the function of poetry and to the relationship between a poet and his audience. Whereas he earlier believed human beings were something he had a right to use or abuse, he eventually views them as people for whom he is responsible, and on whose behalf he should act.

Sordello's altered perspective is illustrated in the most dramatic and emotional scene of the poem which pitches Sordello, the poet, against Salinguerra, the man of action. Immediately preceding this scene Sordello listens to and learns from the "low voice" who convinces him of the vanity of his dream to reestablish an idealized Roma. This dream is replaced by Sordello with the goal of convincing Salinguerra to support the Guelf cause, an attempt that elicits only scorn for Sordello and his poetry. Unlike Eglamor, who retreated and died when faced with the rejection of his poetry, Sordello is induced to defend with courage and eloquence the role of a poet: his purpose is strengthened by travails. The poet's role as "earth's essential king" (V. 491) is now described as one of "service" and "labor" rather than as one of privilege:

E'en he [the poet] must stoop contented to express
No tithe of what's to say--the vehicle
Never sufficient--but his work is still
For faces like the faces that select
A single service I am bound effect
Nor murmur, bid–me, still as poet, bow
Taurello to the Guelf cause, disallow
The Kaiser's coming--which with heart, soul, strength,
I labor for, this eve, who feel at length
My past career's outrageous vanity
And would (as vain amends) die, even die
And I first estimate the boon of life.

(V. 635-646)
Sordello now realizes that even poets "must stoop" to "work" within the conditions and realities of human experience; they must struggle to express their perceptions of truth even though "the vehicle" is "never sufficient;" and they must "labor" in "service" for "faces like the faces" of his Guelfs.

Sordello's willingness to die to complete this "work" and recognition of the "boon" of serving others are crowning gestures which stretch his soul to its limit; indeed, he dies shortly thereafter, and has not been able to convince Salinguerra to support the Guelf cause. The entire thrust of Sordello, however, has been that each person's endeavour to contribute to the composite work of mankind and to the partially revealed divine creative purpose is a God-like gesture which merits a poet's laurels and God's grace. Sordello's not entirely fulfilling endeavours as a poet are used to illustrate Browning's belief that there is room in God's mansion for such men, who are admirable for their attempts to understand, and to imitate, the creativity of God. Aprile in Paracelsus claims that "God is the perfect poet./ Who in his person acts his own creations" (II. 648-649); men, God's creations, are his poems, and they, in turn, are urged throughout the Browning canon to be God-like and creative. That they can do so in human terms, and be rewarded for their efforts, is implied by the narrator of The Ring and the Book who believes "man's feat" is to "--Mimic creation, galvanism for life./ But still a glory portioned in the scale" (II. 739-741). Sordello's narrator, too, tries to "--Mimic creation" by affirming and demonstrating in his poem that men can be "a glory portioned in the scale." More than Sordello, the narrator of his poem believes a poet's creative efforts will be
sustained by a loving, as well as powerful God. In the end, however, Sordello's vacillating attitudes towards poets, mankind, and God have been tempered, but he does not share the narrator's belief that by serving mankind through his poetry he is simultaneously serving a loving God. What Sordello lacks, says the narrator, is faith in and love for a power beyond himself, a power towards which he could will his powers, and through which he could complete his potential as a poet. If Sordello had loved and imitated the creativity of such a power, he could have written a true poem—a Sordello—which records a nineteenth-century-poet's aims to be a "Maker-see," to create "New structure from the ancient," and to graft the ethical and religious poetic principles of English Renaissance Christian humanism to his concerns with the psychological complexities of the "inmost life" of the human mind and spirit.
Notes

1 Collins, Moral-Aesthetic Theory, p. 77. For a similar view of Sordello's place in Browning's developing theories of poets and poetry see Drew, A Critical Introduction, p. 40: "we may find in the poem the raw material . . . of many of Browning's later poems about poetry and the poet's responsibilities . . . ."


3 Yetman, "Exorcising Shelley," p. 97. See also Columbus and Kemper in "Sordello and the Speaker," pp. 251-252, for the argument that the poem "heralds almost every major theme of unease of the Victorian age."

4 For a sensitive, intelligent evaluation of Browning's response to Shelley written from a biographical perspective, see Maynard, Browning's Youth, especially Chapter nine, called "Sun-Treader: First Flight," pp. 191-237.

5 The essay was written at the request of the publisher, Edward Moxon, and the book was withdrawn from publication shortly after its appearance in 1852 when the letters were discovered to be fraudulent. In a letter written "To Thomas Carlyle," October 1851, Letter 5, p. 36, Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise, ed. Thurman L. Hood (London: John Murray, 1933), Browning refers to "a mere Preface to some new letters of Shelley," the "Essay on Shelley" will hereafter be referred to as the "Essay," page references are cited in the text, and are to The Poems, vol. I.


7 Kintner, LRBEBB, "To Elizabeth Barrett," 13 January 1845, Letter 3, 1, 7.

8 Elizabeth's comments on Browning's poetry coincide with the notion that poets tend to combine these faculties. She says in Kintner, LRBEBB, "To R.B.," 15 January 1845, Letter 4, 1, 9, that "You [Browning] have in your vision two worlds, or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective and objective in the
habits of your mind. You can deal both with abstract thought and
with human passion in the most passionate sense."

9 Kintner, LRBEBB, "To Elizabeth Barrett," 17 February 1845,
Letter 8, I, 21. Browning points out that he has not yet written the
'R.B. a poem' he hopes he was "born to begin and end."

comprehensive analysis of Browning’s emphasis in Sordello and the
later poetry on the "reader’s role in the synethetist poem." What is
required, says Collins, is an "involved, hard-working and creative
audience. . . ."

11 See Stempel, "The Art of the Makers-See," p. 555, for the
argument that Browning uses a new narrative method which borrows from
dioramic narratives to create "three-dimensional solidity. . . ."

12 See the chapter "A Poet’s Education: Tradition as Found," in
Browning’s Youth, pp. 295-334. Dante and Petrarch are included as
Italian Renaissance figures whose work Browning studied.

13 Browning refers specifically to Sidney’s Defense of Poesy:
see the letter "To Alfred Domett," ca. 25 March 1840, Robert Browning
and Alfred Domett, ed. F. G. Kenyon (London: Smith, Elder, 1906),
p. 28.

14 Bowra’s "Dante and Sordello," contains an account of the
historical Sordello’s poetic canon: the remains of his poetry include
12 chansons and a didactic poem about chivalrous ideals. Bowra notes
that Sordello was a "thorough Platonic" interested in the "cult of
ideal love." Browning has retained the historical Sordello’s Platonic
inclinations, and has added to them an opposing tendency towards
libertinism; Browning believes that extremes of Platonism tend to
issue in extremes of libertinism, a situation we see in Sordello’s
relationship with Palma.

15 The publication date in 1840 implies that Browning could not
have read it until at least then, but this does not mean that he
would be unfamiliar with Shelley’s ideas about poets and poetry.
Shelley’s attitude is reflected in poems such as Prometheus Unbound,
Adonais, and Alastor.

16 Maynard, Browning’s Youth, pp. 324-325.

17 To compare two kinds of poets was commonplace. Aristotle does
it in his Poetics, a work referred to by Sidney. Isobel Armstrong
points out that this was also a common practice of the periodical
critics of the 1830's in her introduction to Victorian Scrutinies
(London: The Athlone Press, 1972); thereafter cited as Scrutinies.
She refers to the example of Aubrey Devere’s distinction between the
'Ideal' and the ‘National' poets, the latter of which use contemporary
themes and history in their poetry, while the former prefer what is
classical and ideal.
18. This reading of Sidney's Defense is indebted to the essay written by Arthur E. Barker entitled "An Apology for the Study of Renaissance Poetry."


21. Maynard points out in Browning's Youth, p. 319, that the study of English literature in the nineteenth century "barely existed as a school subject" and "could be acquired only through a deliberate course of self-education." On the other hand, Dante and Petrarch were studied as a matter of course.

22. See Chapter One, p. 15, and note 18. Similar distinctions are made by Browning between a man said to be a poem while his poem is not in "Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books." The speaker says of Boehme, a German mystic, "You are a poem, though Your poem's nought..." (1: 47).

23. Sordello is described as being a forerunner of Dante's, and Dante is referred to by the narrator mainly in Book I. The images used to describe him suggest Dante's Christian-Platonic affiliations: he is the "consummate orb" (I. 3?6) and "Serenest of the progeny of God" (I. 360) living in an "August sphere" (I. 366).

24. McAleer, Learned Lady, "To Mrs. Thomas Fitzgerald," 17 March 1883, Letter 51, p. 157. Shaw in "Mimesis as 'Invention' argues that Victorian poets such as Browning in their interpretations of history tended to "match" and "make," to draw analogies with other historical periods and subjects within which they would "make" original contributions.

25. For examples of Victorian responses to Sordello see The Critical Heritage, pp. 60-67. In this collection of reviews Sordello is criticized for its "faulty structure," "broken sobs of sentences," and "unintelligible oozings of nonsense."

DeVane points out in Browning Handbook, p. 86, that of the first edition of 500 copies only 157 were sold, and that it took Browning's reputation "twenty-five years to recover fully" from the impact of Sordello.

26. See Donald Hâir's Experiments With Genre, p. 32, for a thorough account of how Browning in Sordello "modified considerably the conventions of the narrative poetry of his day..." Park Honan in Browning's Characters, p. 37, says Sordello is "boldly experimental" in "almost every technical aspect..." See Dale's "Trying the Stuff of Language," pp. 359-369, for a persuasive analysis of Browning's
early experiments with language. Dale believes Browning is using language to illustrate the unavailability of truth, and that he dismantles English syntax to mirror more approximately human perceptions.


28 Armstrong, Scrutinies, p. 6.

29 Sordello contains many allusions to Romantic poets, in particular to Shelley and Coleridge. When the narrator observes that "the stain/0' the world forsakes Sordello..." (III. 45-16), he is obviously recalling Shelley's lament in Adonais that life "Stains the white radiance of eternity..." Similarly, Shelley in his Defence of Poetry describes poets as "prophets" who aim to "apprehend the true and the Beautiful," a view which is expressed in varying degrees by Sordello, Eglamor, and Naddo. The following simile of Sordello's likens the inspired poet to a "huge throbbing stone," and is similar to a symbol of Coleridge's:

But he would give and take on Song's one point:  
Like some huge throbbing-stone that, poised a-joint,  
Sounds to affect on its basaltic bed  
Must sue in just one accent: tempests shed  
Thunder, and raves the landstorm.  

(II. 459-463)


This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence  
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade.  
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,  
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and shakes  
Upon the strings of this Aeolian lute.  

(11. 3-7)

In both instances the poet is compared to an object which will receive and express divine inspiration.

30 Donald Hair in Experiments With Genre, p. 36, likens Sordello's "fit/Of rapture" to the dependence on inspiration of the Spasmodics of the 1850's who attempted to extend or revive this view of poets common in Romantic poetry, yet with roots in classical and biblical traditions.
It is not clear that Browning was familiar with this essay, although Maynard observes in Browning's Youth, p. 316, that in the 1830's Browning "seems to have made a gradual study of practically all of Milton's works."


Donald Hair in Experiments With Genre, p. 36, observes that "much that Browning was reacting against seems represented by Eglamor. . . ." Herbert Tucker, for another attitude towards Eglamor, discusses him as a formalist poet who has 'fixed' poetry, and who is "wasted on the world . . ." (Browning's Beginnings, p. 117).

See Collins, Moral-Aesthetic Theory, p. 45, n. 19: Naddo "serves primarily as a whipping post on which Browning can vent his feelings for those reviewers who had regarded Pauline as 'a dreamy volume!' . . ." See also Tucker, Browning's Beginnings, p. 18, in which Naddo is described as "the spirit of criticism."


Pauline (1833), Mill copy, Victoria and Albert Museum, Forster Collection.

Donald Hair notes in Experiments with Genre, p. 37, that "As Sordello develops he moves through the chief genres in the historical sequence described by Aristotle in the Poetics. . . ."

Mason, "The Importance of Sordello, p. 126.

DeVane in A Browning Handbook, p. 80, discusses the digression in relation to Browning's trip to Italy in 1838, and his conversion to "pity for suffering humanity. . . ."

Compare the similar plight and language of "Andrea del Sarto," the 'faultless painter,' whose "placid and perfect art" (1. 99) and whose inability to paint the soul of men are blamed on a will which is "fettered fast" (1. 51).

The choice of a machine metaphor to illustrate the idea of progress in poetry is both curious and deliberate, and seems intended to affirm both poetry and machines in an era said by Carlyle to be unpoteical because of the ravages of the machine age. William Johnson Fox, in an 1831 review of Tennyson's Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, Westminster Review, xiv (January 1831), 210-224, employs a similar image to which
Browning might be alluding. In his introduction Fox argues that poetry should progress through time in much the same way as a machine does: "the machinery of a poem is not less susceptible of improvement than the machinery of a cotton-mill..." John Maynard shows that the friendship between Fox and Browning began in 1824, and resulted in Browning's references to Fox as his 'literary father' and 'his Chiron' in Browning's Youth, p. 181. It is not unlikely, then, that Browning in Sordello was acknowledging Fox's idea and image.

Browning's response to the complex and difficult relations between the knowledge of good and evil is similar to Milton's in the Aereopagitica:

Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned, that those confused seeds which were imposed by Psyche as an incessant labor to cull out and sort asunder, were not more intermixed (Complete Poems and Major Prose, p. 728).

The Poems, p. 1051.

In the opening Book of Sordello which describes his life in the "drowsy Paradise" of Goito, the narrator points out that Sordello's limitations are partly due to his isolated and protected environment since he is "fenced about/ From most that nurtures judgment, care and pain..." (I. 685-686). Sordello's "judgment" and character gain strength and dignity when he experiences "care and pain." Browning's Pope has this idea in mind when he asks

was the trial sore?  
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!  
Why comes temptation but for man to meet  
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,  
And so be pedestalled in triumph?  

(X. 1182-1186)
CONCLUSION

Henry James perceived that Browning, despite the range of cosmopolitan and Italian influences and effects in his poetry, belonged "unmistakably in the great tradition" of English literature:

For the great value of Browning is that at bottom, in all the deep spiritual and human essential, he is unmistakably in the great tradition--is, with all his Italianisms and cosmopolitanism . . . a magnificent example of the best and least dilettantish English spirit.¹

This thesis, too, has been concerned with the relations and discriminations to be made between Browning's "Italianisms" and his affinities with English literature, especially that of the Renaissance.

It has been demonstrated that Sordello, Browning's first major Renaissance poem, indicates his tendency to use "Italianisms" and Italian Renaissance settings partly to persuade readers not to idealize or repudiate the period, or to see it as radically different from the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. Comparisons drawn in the thesis between Browning's use of a late-medieval, early-Renaissance setting in Sordello, and the attitudes towards these periods of representative contemporaries, have illustrated the atypicality of Browning's affirmations of the progressive efforts of men throughout history to respond creatively to the "Eden tale" of human experience. It has been the argument of this thesis that Browning, along with his
awareness of historical particularities, sees the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the nineteenth century as being in some ways complementary to one another in terms of shared and universal human inclinations and experiences, and in terms of God's providential ways. Sordello's historical setting, then, is developed as a "type/ Of Life" which draws on the experiences and concerns of thirteenth- and nineteenth-century men and women, and should not be dismissed by readers as irrelevant in favor of Browning's avowed emphasis on "the development of a soul."

In addition to providing readers with a comprehensive discussion of Browning's creative use of setting in Sordello, this thesis has attempted to resolve problems about distinctions to be made between Browning, Sordello, and the narrator. It has been demonstrated that both the thirteenth-century Sordello and the nineteenth-century narrator are represented as developing, fallible characters within the fiction of the poem. Through their characters Browning contrasts two responses to human experience and poetry he believes are characteristic of the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. This thesis has shown that the Italianate Sordello represents some thirteenth- and nineteenth-century extremes of Neoplatonism and libertinism which are contrasted with and offset by the increasingly temperate responses of the Christian-humanist narrator who places the world and time in a dynamic, reciprocal, and progressive relationship with what is divine and infinite; the narrator's responses, it has been shown, indicate the poem's norms.

The thesis has illustrated through its comparisons and contrasts of Sordello and the narrator the centrality of and relations between the themes of secular love, religious experience, and poetry;
Sordello has been shown on the one hand to seek in his responses to these matters mystical, otherworldly experiences which repudiate the world and time in favor of visionary dreams. When these prove unsatisfactory, he turns to an equally dissatisfying libertinism. This thesis has demonstrated through its detailed study of the text ways through which the narrator's developing response to Sordello indicates sustaining alternatives to these vacillating extremes. The detailed study of image patterns and allusions has illuminated the organic unities of Browning's poetry in this eclectic yet focused poem; it has also illustrated Browning's provision through his narrator of a dynamic structural principle designed to involve the reader in the poem's poetic processes. The narrator's psychological processes, developing perceptions, and associative turns of mind are models of the actual workings and flux of the human mind and imagination. It has been shown that the narrator's developing understanding of Sordello's experiences, of historical processes, of poetic processes, and of his responsibilities as a poet, eventually approximates Browning's attitudes, and dispels complaints about the poem's disunity of purpose and structure.

The thesis has illustrated that Sordello is primarily about its nineteenth-century narrator's developing response to poetry and to his poem, and that the narrator aligns himself with poetic traditions and techniques characteristic of the English Renaissance. In so doing, he makes a conscious effort to break from both Italian Renaissance and Romantic poetic conventions, and tries to reanimate poetic principles and techniques he believes could offset nineteenth-century attitudes towards poetry as being only visionary or as confined
to reflections of human emotions. The thesis has indicated that Browning, too, was in process of consciously detaching himself from the Romantic tradition exemplified by poets such as Shelley which in turn reflected some concerns of the Italian Renaissance.

Sordello, in addition to reflecting this detachment, indicates some of Browning's developing convictions about the implications of secular love, religious experience, and poetry. The poem illustrates, for example, Browning's distrust of the extremes of Neoplatonism and libertinism in human relationships, and of the desire that religious experience be immediately and permanently transforming rather than a lifelong "probation"; similarly, he resists the notions that poetry should reflect only human emotions, or that it should be confined to visions of idealized worlds. Although Browning is working out the implications of these matters in Sordello, subsequent poems record elaborated and increasing perceptions. This thesis has illustrated Browning's developing perceptions about religious experience, for example, through the discussions of significant revisions for the 1863 edition of Sordello and through references to Browning's more mature poems. In each case the later Browning has been shown to be less stoical, more affirmative about God's challenging ways and human responses to them, and more knowledgeable about the issues involved, whether they be theological, psychological, historical, ethical, or poetic.

Sordello, however, significantly anticipates most of these theological, psychological, historical, ethical, and poetic concerns. That these concerns resonate with ever-increasing depth of tone marks both the poet he was, and was in process of becoming.
Notes

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