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HEARING "SORDELLO'S STORY TOLD": READABILITY AND NARRATIVE PROCESS IN ROBERT BROWNING'S *SORDELLO*

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Who will, may hear Sordello's story told:

His story? Who believes me shall behold

The man, pursue his fortunes to the end,

Like me: for as the friendless-people's friend

Spied from his hill-top once, despite the din

And dust of multitudes, Pentapolin

Named o' the Naked Arm, I single out

Sordello, compassed murkily about

With ravage of six long sad hundred years.

Only believe me? Ye Believe? (1:1-10)

From its first ten lines, Robert Browning's *Sordello*—widely considered to be "the most notoriously obscure poem of the nineteenth century"— frustrates the reader's expectations (Kennedy and Hair 65). Enjambed couplets direct him to "hear" and "behold" the character of Sordello—a thirteenth century Lombard troubadour. Such commands, invoking the physical actions required in watching a performance, make the reader feel more like he is sitting in a theatre than reading a poem. So vivid will the story be, the narrator asserts, it will be as if the reader can "behold / The man" before his eyes. In order to move past these first three lines, the reader has little choice but to "believe" that he will deliver on this promsie. But when in the very next line the narrator compares his sighting of Sordello to Don Quixote's mistaking a cloud of dust for King Pentapolin "o' the Naked Arm," he "mocks his authority along with [his readers'] credulousness" because the reader cannot be sure whether his story should be treated with the same skepticism that a reader would use in approaching a story from Don Quixote (Froula 162).

"Badgering and mocking the imaginary crowd before his fictive diorama booth," Browning's narrator thus indicates that the reader cannot expect to simply be led along, but must instead be prepared to extend the same kind of careful effort required in reading the first ten lines to the poem entire.

In his choice to summarize the first two lines with the conditional, "if you give me your hearty attention," David Duff—author of an intensely dedicated and detailed exposition of *Sordello*, which summarizes and illuminates almost every line of the poem— picks up on this appeal for intense participation.[1] But as contemporary criticism would reveal so acutely, "hearty attention" may be optimistic phrasing. One critic of *Sordello* complained of "the unrelaxing demand which is made throughout upon the intellectual and imaginative energy and alertness of the reader" and another remarked,

> It is quite certain that nothing can be done with it, nothing can be made of it, without great attention and some trouble—more trouble than we usually expect to be called upon to give to any book but one of high mathematics… If there is amusement to be found in 'Sordello,' it is the amusement of finding out puzzles. (Dowden 518, Church 242)

Though both of these observations condemn Browning's demand as excessive, they also simultaneously acknowledge what he was really seeking: just as with a book of "high mathematics" or with "finding out puzzles," the reader must invest "imaginative energy and alertness" to become an active participant. By insisting that his readers assume such a role from the outset, Browning attempts to prepare them for his use of techniques such as the dramatic present throughout the rest of the poem (Froula 162). Contemporary criticism reveals that the

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[1] See *An Exposition of Browning's 'Sordello': With Historical and Other Notes*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1906. Print.

poem did not succeed in eliciting this participation, for *Sordello* is often considered one of

Browning's most significant poetic failures. Nevertheless, the experience Browning gained in

producing *Sordello*—one of his first long poems—undoubtedly served him well in future works;

as one critic asks, "could the skill with which Browning handles the heroic couplet in 'My Last

Duchess'…have developed without his experiment with the form in *Sordello?*" (Kennedy and

Hair 68)

In his 1863 Preface to *Sordello*, Browning reveals that his purpose "lay on the incidents

in the development of a soul," for "little else is worth study" (194). Though countless difficulties

arise for the reader throughout *Sordello*, it is arguably those which hinder the reader's

appreciation of this focus that contribute most heavily to its failure. From a practical perspective,

the poem's immediate downfall lies in the way in which it provides little incentive to keep

reading; therefore, the barriers to the reader that manifest in the poem's beginning perhaps merit

more attention than failures occurring later in the piece. For this reason, my analysis is concerned

only with what I define as the poem's "introduction," spanning from line one up to the reader's

first encounter with Sordello, which ends in line 444: "Ah, but Sordello? 'Tis the tale I mean / To

tell you" (1:443-444). This essay will first examine the burdens on the reader generated by

Browning's complicated syntax and jarring poetic flow—to which I refer collectively as "issues

of readability." Although I see these barriers to readability as exhausting to the reader, I would

nevertheless argue that they merit further critical attention because of the mimetic experiences

that occasionally arise from them. Still, these difficulties, along with the halting and constantly

interrupted narrative process of the speaker, hinder the reader from moving through the poem

and ultimately discourage him from continuing to read it. Next, I will trace the negative impact

on the reader's experience that is created by the narrator's troubling ethos and spasmodic lack of

any sense of dramatic proportion. By infusing every possible moment in the poem with the language and techniques of high drama, the narrator prevents the reader from being immersed in the poem because he receives no indication as to how to direct or proportion his focus.

In critical scholarship of *Sordello,* one common lament is that these techniques might have been more successful if only Browning had not used them all simultaneously; in this vein, critics such as Mark D. Hawthorne and R.W. Church illuminate how this or that isolated problem would actually serve a clear and functional purpose in the poem if it were not overshadowed by the dysfunction of other elements. In spite of these failures, *Sordello* stands as "a document that can provide oblique evidence of Browning's own notions about language, creativity, the soul and the unconscious, or his Platonic concepts of beauty, or his debt to the Romantic poets" (Kennedy and Hair 67). Though *Sordello* did not make Browning a successful poet, it did open questions about his poetic identity that scholars explore even today; from the assertion that Browning was of the Spasmodic school, to the idea that he was a proto-modernist, *Sordello* contains evidence for all. Ultimately, in spite of the difficulties *Sordello* presents, I argue against the idea that *Sordello* should be reduced, as Honan Park asserts, to a mere "laboratory of poetic devices."[2] Metaphorically speaking, *Sordello* might be better understood as a kind of "crowded museum," because the analogy of the laboratory reduces Browning's techniques to the level of "experiments"—thereby diminishing their value and the worthiness of examining them. The powerful moments of poetic skill appearing throughout *Sordello,* however, are difficult to appreciate largely because they are difficult to access; although simple navigability and ready visibility of artifacts improve the overall quality of a person's experience in a museum (and therefore the quality of the museum itself), the reality is the artifacts are no less valuable and no less worthy of examination when the viewer's path is obstructed. Similarly, the mimetic

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[2] See "Browning's Poetic Laboratory: The Uses of 'Sordello.'" *Modern Philology* 56.3 (1959): 162-166.

analogies, poignant metaphors, and scenes of natural beauty within *Sordello* retain their value in spite of the awkwardness of the poem that contains them, and in this way make *Sordello* more worthy of modern critical attention.

After the failure of his play *Strafford* in 1837, Browning traveled to Venice "to gather some authentic detail" for *Sordello*— which he had begun in 1834 but had put off to write the poem *Paracelsus* (Kennedy and Hair 60). As Browning had read, in the early thirteenth century, northern Italy was consumed by the struggle between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines—two factions who had been at war for almost eighty years. In order to further their own political interests, the Guelfs, who were largely wealthy merchants, sided with the Pope against imperial authority. The Ghibellines, who were feudal aristocrats, supported the Holy Roman Emperor. Set in the midst of this conflict, Browning's *Sordello* creates a fictionalized version of the life of Sordello da Goito, a Ghibelline poet and soldier who is also referenced in the sixth canto of Dante's *Purgatorio.* The first book of Sordello introduces the political conflict, the narrator, and the eponymous protagonist as well some key political figures, including Count Richard, Ecelin, and Azzo. In books two through five, Sordello struggles with his identity as a poet, develops political sympathy for the Guelfs, and focuses on his love interest, Palma, who is engaged to someone else but who loves Sordello. In the climax of the poem in book six, Sordello is shocked to learn that he is not the orphan son of an insignificant archer, but the son of Ghibelline leader Taurello Salinguerra, who is still living. The revelation of his paternity—which suddenly places him in a position of political responsibility to a group he does not support— creates such stressful confusion for Sordello that he collapses and dies almost immediately. In spite of this, Browning conveys Sordello as being historically misremembered as the glorious hero and statesman he failed to become in life: "[passing] with posterity, to all intents, / For just the god

he never could become/ As Knight, Bard, Gallant, men were never dumb / In praise of him" (6: 826-8).

The almost five hundred line introduction to *Sordello* begins with the call for the reader's "hearty attention" and the troubling Quixotic attempt. Moving forward to present the city of Verona—the setting of the first book of the poem—the narrator stops and interrupts himself: though it would be best to present Sordello, "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," the narrator cannot do so out of fear that the audience will not adequately understand (1:15-17). Thus, he must adopt "the authoritative role of the showman-teacher" and "take his stand,/…pointing-pole in hand, / Beside [his protagonist]" (Riede 188, Browning 1:29-31). Having made this clear, the narrator, who identifies himself as the poet, reveals that all poets "know the dragnet's trick" of summoning an audience from among the dead—which he has done (1:35). Addressing his crowd of the living and dead, then, the narrator moves to present Verona again, only to be interrupted by the appearance of the spirit of Shelley. After dismissing the ghost, "stay—thou spirit, come not near / Now," Verona finally appears (1:60-61). Giving the historical setting as northern Italy "six hundred years and more" in the past, the narrator sets the scene: a group of Guelfs has just been informed that their prince, Count Richard of Saint Boniface, has been taken hostage by the Ghibelline leader Taurello Salinguerra (1:77). The Guelfs are outraged, their "ripe hate" filling them "like a wine" (1:93). After over one hundred lines of historical background of the conflict, the narrator returns to this night and ventures to physically direct the audience into the palace in which Sordello sits idle, thinking about Palma.

As even the briefest reading of *Sordello* reveals, Browning's complicated poetic flow and scrambled syntax—issues of readability— serve as the most fundamental barrier to the poem's

navigability and comprehension. Setting out to counter the "conventional effects of the couplet," Browning deconstructs the form so radically that readers "have to struggle just to be aware of the repeated sounds" even as they appear consistently at the end of each line (Kennedy and Hair 65). In abandoning an end-stopped pattern as early as the poem's fourth line and resuming it only sporadically throughout, Browning indicates that the reader should not expect the poem to maintain an even, measured flow. Moreover, the rhyme word is frequently "one not naturally stressed or sometimes one less important semantically" and most lines are "enjambed rather than end-stopped" (65). Thus frustrating the anticipation that repeated rhyme provides closure, Browning prevents the reader from depending on the conventions of poetic language to help him understand *Sordello*.

Simultaneously, Browning crowds the poem with "bewildering syntax of phrase piled upon phrase, clause upon clause, parenthesis interrupted by parenthesis, and pronoun references with uncertain antecedents in sentences so long that readers have to go back through them again and again to sort them out," (Kennedy and Hair 65). Accordingly, Church describes the experience of reading *Sordello* in his complaint that reading the poem is like reading "unpointed Hebrew words, where you have the consonants, and, according as you know the language, put in the vowels" (241). Much like Browning's determination to avoid consistent end-stopped flow, these syntactical issues are also made evident in the first ten lines, in the way in which his Quixotic attempt takes place in one long, multi-clause sentence spanning from line two through line nine, referencing not only Sordello and the narrator but the characters of Don Quixote and the King of the Garamantes, who is known as the "Pentapolin of the Naked Arm." Moving from Sordello to himself, to a comparison to Don Quixote, to the King, back to Sordello and ultimately back to himself with his call for the audience to "believe [him]," the narrator clearly

demonstrates the kind of fast, abrupt pace with which he will expect the reader to keep up

throughout the poem (1:10). For someone who is not exceptionally familiar with *Don Quixote*,

Sordello is confusing before the end of its second sentence, because it is only "according as [he

knows]" *Don Quixote* that the reader can "put in" the meaning of the narrator's comparison of

himself to "the friendless-people's friend" and the story of Sordello to the sight of the King (1:2).

      Thus the poem's first lines both embody and foreshadow what I see as the central

problem with *Sordello's* issues of readability. Though scrambled syntax and erratic poetic flow

present difficulties throughout the poem, they are not in themselves sufficient to discourage a

determined or interested reader. Whenever Browning's expectations for what the reader has read

and experienced do not match what the reader actually has read and experienced, however, these

difficulties become almost insurmountable. Because the reader has insufficient literary

experience to appreciate it, Browning merely exhausts his reader rather than challenges him.

When, later in the poem's introduction, Browning uses convoluted syntax and flow to create

mimetic experiences of what he is describing, the dramatic effect of these experiences hinges

entirely upon the reader's preparedness for and ability to recognize the use of such a technique.

Given that a majority of the reading public would likely not have the experience required to

recognize Browning's mimetic attempt for what it is and would have expended significant

energy in progressing through the poem up until this point, in the eyes of these readers *Sordello's*

impassability overshadows its brilliance. In his later poems, such as "My Last Duchess,"

Browning seems to better estimate the capabilities of his audience, to the effect that the mimetic

experience of speech of that poem— a Dramatic Monologue— makes it one of his most

frequently anthologized pieces.

Though issues of readability challenge the reader throughout the poem's introduction, it is most instructive to examine their impact on the effectiveness of Browning's metaphors, because unlike with the complicated mimetic experiences Browning presents later, the average reader of poems can be expected to both recognize a metaphor when it appears and to easily grasp its dramatic purpose. Because issues of poetic flow and of syntax rarely occur separately throughout *Sordello*, I will not separate them in my analysis. Within the poem's introduction, two metaphors suffer heavily from these issues of readability, the simile of Taurello as an osprey in lines 127 through 135, and the extended cliffs and chokeweed metaphor that spans from line 213 through line 226.

In order to examine the osprey simile, a brief explanation of its historical and poetic situation is required. The simile occurs as an envoy gives a background of the circumstances that led to Count Richard's capture at Ferrara. These circumstances were that Taurello held Ferrara and awaited military assistance from the Emperor. Seeing that no help was coming, Taurello decides to leave in the name of peace because "[his] presence, [is] judged the single bar / To permanent tranquility" in Ferrara (1:151-152). No sooner does he leave, however, than the Guelfs with their leader Azzo invade and burn and ravage Ferrara, which causes Salinguerra to come back with armed forces, put down the uprising with a counterattack, and then offer the defeated Guelfs a parley. As soon as Azzo and the Guelf prince Count Richard enter the town to make the agreement, however, Salinguerra takes them captive. Though the poetic explanation of these circumstances spans over sixty lines, only the first nine are required in order to delineate Browning's issues of readability:

> "Taurello," quoth an envoy, "as in wane
>
> "Dwelt at Ferrara. Like an osprey fain

> "To fly but forced the earth his couch to make
>
> "Far inland, till his friend the tempest wake,
>
> "Waits he the Kaiser's coming; and as yet
>
> "That fast friend sleeps, and he too sleeps: but let
>
> "Only the billow freshen, and he snuffs
>
> "The aroused hurricane ere it enroughs
>
> "The sea it means to cross because of him. (1:127-135)

Primarily, the contrasting motion of the end rhyme and Browning's punctuation and enjambment prevent the reader from establishing a conventional reading pace. Although the first three lines of the excerpt move fairly straightforwardly, the momentum they establish ceases abruptly with the phrase "far inland" (1:130). Because "forced the earth his couch to make" seems like a complete idea, a first time reader is surprised by the additional modifier in the next line. Given that there is no substantial difference in meaning with the addition of these two words, they seem to serve little purpose except to contribute syllables to the fourth line. In terms of syntax, the inclusion of the words "far inland" damages the accessibility of the endophoric relationship between "like an osprey" and Taurello's bird-like behavior by increasing the distance between them. When Browning then follows "far inland" with five short and differently punctuated clauses, it becomes almost impossible for the reader to regain a sense of poetic flow. In his repeated use of the word "and," Browning exacerbates this problem: not only does the repetition lend to the impression that the sentence will never come to a complete stop, but it also creates another variable in rhythm. Whereas before, the reader looked to frequent punctuation and occasional end-rhyme to create rhythm and stopping points, here the word "and" presents itself as a third factor. Given that it is already difficult to read the poem without instinctively

emphasizing end rhyme, the manifestation of a third repeating element, even over a few lines,

can only impede the reader more. Although the initial comparison between Taurello and an

osprey is easily accessible, the convoluted nature of Browning's poetic flow limits the

accessibility of his description of Taurello's osprey-like behavior, diminishing the impact of the

metaphor.

These issues of readability are similarly manifested in Browning's attempt to correlate the

conflicting factions with the image of choke-weed growing upon cliffs in the sunlight. This

complicated allegory spans almost thirty lines and ends not with any temporary respite but with a

frustrating reopening of a previous metaphor: "'Hill-cat'—who called him so?" (1:239). In light

of the expanse of this particular allegory, the most straightforward approach to its analysis

divides it into two parts. The first:

> cliffs, an earthquake suffered jut
>
> In the mid-sea, each domineering crest
>
> Which nought save such another throe can wrest
>
> From out (conceive) a certain chokeweed grown
>
> Since o'er the waters, twine and tangle thrown
>
> Too thick, too fast accumulating round,
>
> Too sure to over-riot and confound
>
> Ere long each brilliant islet with itself
>
> Unless a second shock save shoal and shelf,
>
> Whirling the sea-drift wide: (1:213-221)

and the second:

<div align="center">

Alas, the bruised

</div>

And sullen wreck! Sunlight to be diffused

For that!—sunlight, 'neath which, a scum at first,

The million fibres of our chokeweed nurst

Dispread themselves, mantling the troubled main,

And, shattered by those rocks, took hold again. (1:221-226)

The first concentrates solely on the relationship between the cliffs and the chokeweed, while the second brings sunlight as a representation of the Pope to bear on the scene. As Jack and Smith explain in their annotations,

These feudatories are like rocks which an earthquake has uplifted in the mid-sea; but now conceive a certain choke-weed tangled round them; how shall they free themselves of this but by another earthquake. But what a wreck the sun shall then shine on; that sun which has blazed so kindly on the weed that it has grown carpet-like, and thereon borne a new growth. We people are the weed, therefore the sunlike Pope, rather than the earthquake emperor. (205)

In this metaphor then, the cliffs represent the Ghibellines and the chokeweed the opposite party; the "earthquake" "refers to the Emperor's invasion of Lombardy" (205). In terms of similarities, both parts of this extended allegory suffer from the unnavigability of Browning's enjambment and syntax. By virtue of the disorder of its organization, in which explanatory description appears in the middle of phrase, the first clause, "cliffs, an earthquake suffered jut/ in the mid-sea" hinders the reader from immediately entering into Browning's metaphor. Rather than encouraging the reader to apply himself more diligently to the poem, the intensely jumbled syntax here—from which the reader has enjoyed little deliverance in the entire poem— only signals that more of the same frustration awaits. The lack of pause by either comma or period in

the next phrase (spanning from lines 214 through 217), "each domineering crest / which nought save such another throe can wrest / From out (conceive) a certain chokeweed grown / since o'er the waters" rushes the reader into the next lines, which, "[tangled]" with by alliteration and punctuation, promptly slow him down again. Simultaneously, the absence of a pause gives the reader no opportunity to make sense of what Browning attempts to indicate with the metaphor, ensuring that, in order to understand it properly, the reader has no choice but to reread.

Even as this long enjambed phrase speeds the reader, it nevertheless contains one small interruption in the narrator's parenthetical command to "conceive." Much like the "far inland" example, whatever else its intended effect, its main purpose seems to lie in generating syllables. Here, it may also be intended to contribute an alliterative effect. Simultaneously, the word "conceive" in conjunction with the word "certain" helps to indicate to the reader that the metaphor presents both competing factions, as opposed to focusing on the fate of one or the other. However, given that the reader is already intended to be "[conceiving]" of the terms of the metaphor, this command seems superfluous at best. I would argue that the imperative here intensifies the impression of high drama that the narrator attempts to create by moving rapidly from a rhetorical question into the metaphor. Alternatively, the order to "conceive" may simply echo the intended effect of Browning's linguistic barriers in demanding that the audience read particularly closely.

Within this first section of the cliffs and chokeweed metaphor, the reader is also hindered in pace as a result of alliteration. Browning's line, "twine and tangle thrown / Too thick, too fast accumulating round, / Too sure to over-riot and confound" is nearly impossible to read through without stumbling. Moreover, the alliteration of the next few lines, "ere long each brilliant islet with itself / Unless a second shock save shoal and shelf" contains such a conjunction of "s" and

"sh" sounds that any reader who was not held up before most certainly will be now. Interestingly, despite the obstacle these first alliterative lines contain, Browning's use of the word "too" and his relatively straightforward enjambment create a temporarily exciting moment; the back and forth quality of "too thick," too fast, "too sure to over-riot" creates an impelling rhythm that, like with the enjambed phrase from lines 214 through 217, drives the reader forward into direct entanglement with the next alliterative tongue-twister—upon reading which he is forced to slow down again.

In keeping with the "conceive" imperative in the first part of the cliffs/chokeweed analogy, the second section sees two participatory exclamations from the narrator: "alas, the bruised / And sullen wreck!" and "Sunlight to be diffused / For that!" One interpretation might be that these exclamations echo the lack of confidence in the reader that the narrator expressed at the poem's beginning in that they clearly indicate to us as readers how astonished and appalled we should feel about the historical events. Duff captures this sentiment when he summarizes these lines: "But what a misfortune this would be! Was it for nothing better than this result that the Papal influence had shone in Lombardy?" (30). Similarly, Jack and Smith give, "To think that all the good done by the Papal sun should be undone in such a manner!" as a summation (205). Not only does the narrator thus point to how we as readers should feel about this distant and opaque history—with which he have little real connection— but in these exclamations seems himself consumed by the sentiments he would have us share. Although not perhaps as crucial as issues of readability, the narrator's lack of confidence in the reader nevertheless strains the reader's willingness to continue through the poem.

Thus the metaphors of the osprey and the cliffs and chokeweed burden the reader with their unrelenting complicated syntax and poetic flow. Some, such as one unnamed contributor to

The Saturday Review, argue that Browning's "fancy for grotesque twists of language, for crambo rhymes, and occasionally for verses which creaked like horse-fiddles" in *Sordello* must be "allowed to have been a flaw in his poetic gift."[3] Though this contributor thus categorizes Browning's scrambled verse as indicative of a "poetic 'impotence,'" I argue instead that, although Browning is not always successful in his estimation of the reader's ability, knowledge, and inclinations, he intends to generate a challenging poem in order to serve at least two very specific purposes. First, *Sordello* is not difficult to read because Browning was unskilled, but because he intended for it to be frustrating to the reader in a constructive way. In his book on *Sordello*, David Latane Jr, posits that Browning was not so much writing for the general public as for "a 'fit audience, though few' of what we might now term the avant-garde" (40). Browning's intended readership, as Latane's research suggests, would have "prided themselves on their 'tough faculty of reading' and would not have balked at a little readerly toil" (41). In a letter to one of these men, Amedée de Ripert-Monclar—to whom the poem would be dedicated— Browning explains:

> Tis an affair of some 4000 lines, done in 3 or 4 months, novel as I think, in
>
> conception & execution at once, &, from its nature, not likely to secure an
>
> overwhelming auditory—*you* will make it out easily enough. (Browning 125)

Readers such as these would have believed that a difficult text, unlike those of Byron or Campbell, should irritate like "the grain of sand inside the oyster shell, from which some readerly pearl might grow" (Latane 41). Thus, though Browning's intended audience was small, *Sordello* could nevertheless potentially be read by all, for its circuitous language could aid in the

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[3] "Mr. Robert Browning." *The Saturday Review.*Vol. 68.1781 (1889): 665-666. *British Periodicals*. Web. 1 April 2012.

development of any reader. The practical result of this challenge, however, was that rather than galvanize the reader, *Sordello* exhausted him (Hawthorne 205).

With regard to the osprey and cliffs and chokeweed metaphors, I submit that Browning had a second objective in making the verse difficult to read—that of creating a correspondent mimetic experience to the subject at hand. In the osprey section, the sequence of pauses beginning with "far inland" in line 130 through "and he too sleeps" in line 132 correspond mimetically to the frustrating wait of Taurello for the Emperor; just as Taurello can do nothing to speed the Emperor's coming, neither can the reader do anything to move more quickly past the pauses in these lines. Like Taurello, we too must wait. This mimetic experience of waiting culminates in the phrase, "but let only the billow freshen," which is intended to convey the degree of eagerness Taurello feels in waiting (1:133). Let only Taurello receive a hint that the Emperor will be coming to help him, Browning writes, "and he snuffs / The aroused hurricane ere it enroughs / The sea it means to cross because of him" (1:134-145). By placing these three enjambed lines immediately after a section of repeated pauses, Browning recreates poetically Taurello's overeagerness because the reader "flies" through them just as the osprey jumps to flight. When, as it turns out, Taurello misinterprets the sign of the Emperor's coming, Browning accordingly returns to a series of pauses that slow the reader down: "Sinketh the breeze? His hope-sick eye grows/dim; Creep closer on the creature!"(1:136-137). Any relief the reader feels at having finally encountered some fast-paced verse with relatively clear syntax is quashed as quickly as Taurello's.

These mimetic techniques become even clearer in Browning's cliffs and chokeweeds metaphor. Even the structure of the metaphor itself creates an experience of its subject matter: just as the cliffs "jut / in the mid-sea," so does the explanation for why they are there (an

earthquake) appear in the middle of the phrase (1:213-214). Even the word "jut" is placed at the very end of a line so that it sticks out on the page and sits in the middle of a clause. In keeping with this theme, the narrator's parenthetical command, "(conceive)" also interrupts a phrase (1:216). Although this syntax makes the metaphor more difficult for the reader to immediately understand, it nonetheless accomplishes an interesting mimetic effect. In his recreation of tangled plants, Browning uses alliteration and frequent punctuation rather than syntactical structure. His repeated use of "t" sounds in lines 216 through 218 ("twine and tangle thrown / Too thick, too fast accumulating round, / Too sure to over-riot and confound") are just as sure to "confound" the reader as the "twine and tangle" of plants would burden someone walking through them. Similarly, the "s" and "sh" sounds in line 220 — "unless a second shock save shoal and shelf"— make it equally difficult not to stumble. By thus making the style of his verse engage with his subject matter, Browning creates a more holistic and visceral poetic experience — but only for the readers that are aware of it.

Although these mimetic moments do speak to Browning's real poetic ability, I would posit that they are largely ineffective for several reasons. Primarily, they are so inaccessible on a first read that they are likely to simply go unnoticed. Given that one of the first time reader's primary goals in reading a long historical poem is to understand what is happening, I think it likely that in most cases, the mimetics would be overlooked even on a second or third attempt to read through these sections. Moreover, the unrelenting demand that Browning creates with these issues of readability throughout the poem increases the unlikelihood that a reader would catch on to the intended effect, even if—as Browning seems to assume—they have enough experience with poetry to recognize mimetic attempts when they see them. But even for the energetic and well-versed reader, the impact of Browning's mimetic moments is diminished because he

sacrifices sense in favor of drama. Paradoxically, the jumbled, tangled nature of the cliffs and chokeweed metaphor both contributes to its success in that it effectively mimics its subject, and leads to its failure in that no common reader will appreciate it.

Ultimately, however, Browning's experiments with mimesis in *Sordello* are valuable in tracing his development as a poet and, when noticed, should not be overlooked. In "My Last Duchess," the effect of Browning's mimetic technique is much more substantial. His use of enjambment and pauses, for which *Sordello* serves as precedent, there reflects the pace of real conversation even as the poem is written in heroic couplets. Although the rhyme is clear, the reader does not have to struggle against it as much as in *Sordello* because of the straightforward nature of Browning's syntax. Unlike in *Sordello*, the effect of his unusual poetic flow is immediately apparent and appreciable to readers of all levels; who else could be speaking but a Duke if he has a previous Duchess? Even the syntactical choice to add explanatory detail in the middle of a sentence is both present and improved in "My Last Duchess:" as evidenced by the poem's second through fourth lines, "I call/ That piece a wonder, now: Frá Pandolf's hands / worked busily a day, and there she stands." In his choice to include a colon and to end the sentence within two lines, Browning makes his mid-sentence explanation easy to grasp on a first read. Further, the reader is able to appreciate the Duke's self-important intention in providing this information more clearly because of the clarity of Browning's poetics. Given that Browning will use techniques associated with the issues of readability in *Sordello*— particularly as they relate to mimesis—to his great advantage later in his career, I would argue that they merit more positive attention in critical scholarship; the fact that they are difficult to access in *Sordello* does not necessarily diminish their value in the context of Browning's poetic career, it just means that he had not yet used them to optimal effect.

But even the metaphors in *Sordello's* introduction with relatively few issues of readability

suffer as a result of Browning's struggle to anticipate what the reader knows and what he wants

to know. Two examples of these metaphors are the one which compares the Guelf leader Azzo

and Ghibelline leader Ecelin to lions and hill-cats from line 121 through line 291 (I will focus on

only the first iteration) and the one which describes the experience of reading history from lines

188 through 192—henceforth referred to as the worm metaphor. While the lions and hill-cats

metaphor is hindered by the obscurity of the history to which Browning is referring, the worm

metaphor in addition to the cliffs and chokeweed metaphor demonstrate a failure to gauge what

the reader will find dramatic and what he will see as absurd. Again, one need only look to

Browning's "My Last Duchess" to see his improvement in this area; the way in which he

brilliantly highlights the audacity and arrogance of the Duke in that poem, waiting to reveal its

auditor until after the Duke describes what happened to his last Duchess, demonstrates his

successful mastery of the very dramatic after *Sordello's* popular failure.

In the four lines before the osprey excerpt, Browning creates concurrent metaphors for

Azzo and Ecelin as a "lion" and "hill-cat" respectively (1:122,126):

> Shouted an Estian, "grudge ye such a lot?
>
> "The hill-cat boasts some cunning of her own,
>
> "Some stealthy trick to better beasts unknown,
>
> "That quick with prey enough her hunger blunts,
>
> "And feeds her fat while gaunt the lion hunts." (1:121-126)

Here, Browning's language is considerably clearer than it will be with the osprey metaphor;

whether because someone other than the narrator is speaking or because the analogy is

complicated enough by itself, no problems of end rhyme or enjambment present themselves.

Rather, each line concludes with a pause on a rhymed syllable. But this period of linguistic

clarity does not provide a satisfying respite, for the complications of the narrative here present

their own burden. Though the speaker is of the Guelf faction, he glorifies the cunningness of the

Ghibelline leader. Even as he insults him by implying that his "stealthy [tricks]" are so

deplorable that they are "unknown" to "better beasts" such as Azzo, the Guelf speaker

acknowledges that Ecelin is more successful, having a full belly, "while gaunt the lion hunts." If,

given the archaic nature of the historical subject, the reader does not have a completely clear

understanding of which figure is on which side, this metaphor cannot effectively color the

reader's impression of either character. It is examples like these perhaps, where historical

obscurity interferes with the accessibility of a metaphor, that motivated Church to compare the

exercise of reading *Sordello* to that of "finding out puzzles" (242). But even with a clear grasp on

the history, the metaphor paradoxically makes Azzo seem pitiable—a "gaunt" animal in

comparison to a fattened one—rather than glorious. Though one interpretation is that this

gauntness works in Azzo's favor, making him seem nobler, the way in which it invokes a

characteristic of weakness—his inability to hunt effectively— to achieve that goal may actually

contribute to its ineffectiveness.

Similarly, although Browning's worm metaphor includes much enjambment, its syntax

and poetic flow are significantly more straightforward than the cliffs and chokeweed and osprey

metaphors:

> Such the time's aspect and peculiar woe
>
> (Yourselves may spell it yet in chronicles,
>
> Albeit the worm, our busy brother, drills
>
> His sprawling path through letters anciently

Made fine and large to suit some abbot's eye). (1:188-192)

By asserting that the accounts of this history are slowly disintegrating and being forgotten,

Browning dramatizes the possibility that we could read it for ourselves. In his implication that

other "chronicles" of this story are being destroyed as we read, Browning emphasizes the

availability and value of his own poem because it is in front of us and not being destroyed.

Simultaneously, he creates an interesting dramatic situation in which the story of Sordello is

being both created and destroyed in the same moment. But through his inclusion of both the

worm and the abbot who presumably copied out this history years ago, Browning still

overburdens the reader with unnecessary dramatic detail. Specifically, the narrator's reference to

the worm as "our busy brother" creates a parallel between the reader and the worm that reminds

us of our own mortality. Designating our place in the universe as similar in significance to that of

the worm—a clear symbol of decay that invokes Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"—

Browning thus seems to aggrandize his poem at our expense. In light of the extensive detail, the

reader is left to question why he is informed of the identity of the agent of decay, the worm, and

the size of the letters themselves, but not of the actual identity of the writer, who remains "some

abbot." This anonymity of authorship increases the grand nature of the poem before us at the

expense of the chronicles, because the narrator worries extensively about his own identity earlier

in the poem and because the identity of the author, Browning, is known to us. Though the phrase

"letters anciently / Made fine and large to suit some abbot's eye" strengthens the reader's mental

image in this metaphor, it serves no other purpose and therefore contributes to the excessive

demand that plagues the entire poem. Though the metaphor of the worm contains a powerful and

interesting paradoxical juxtaposition of creation and decay in the way in which Browning

provides simultaneously the images of history being written and destroyed, it contributes little to

the overall poem. Because the worm metaphor interrupts the already enormously taxing informative flow of the narrative without contributing anything relevant to the story, it becomes somewhat frivolous at best. As if to confirm this frivolousness, the metaphor is ignored by contemporary criticism and by the annotators of *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*; even the dedicated summary of David Duff skips over it, saying only, "such then, was the aspect of affairs six hundred years ago" (29). The unwillingness of even those who are well-versed in the poem to comment upon this metaphor only accentuates its lack of dramatic effectiveness.

Given that the effort required on the part of the reader to follow the logic of this worm allegory is demanded after the already involved analogies of the lion, hill-cat, and osprey, much of the dramatic effect this metaphor might generate becomes stifled. On the other hand, though the worm scene does generate unnecessary drama, its brevity aids the reader in accepting or moving past it. With other metaphors, however, including those of the hill-cat and lion, no such briefness comes to the aid of the weary reader. Further, Browning's successive use of such metaphors creates a monotonous feeling and demonstrates a lack of hierarchical significance in the characters; if all are worthy of an animal metaphor—on which should the reader focus? Ironically, Browning creates in *Sordello* a situation in which repeated metaphor lessens rather than heightens dramatic effect because he fails to correctly assess what the reader will find dramatic and compelling and what he will find merely absurd. As Hawthorne laments, it is Browning's issues of readability and repetitive dramatics, including "highly fractured syntax, imagistic metaphors, and elliptic transitions within and between sentences… [that] tend to exhaust the reader [in their intensity]" (205).

In terms of poetic flow, the difficulty of Browning's language is only one element of obstruction. As *Sordello*'s introduction reveals, the halting delivery of the excited narrator,

saturated with constant interruption, backtracking, and repetition, exacerbates the reader's already frustrated experience. For example, the poem's first line, "Who will may hear Sordello's story told" reappears in various forms until the very last line of book six: "who would has heard Sordello's story told" (6:886). In one of its reoccurrences, the narrator asks, "Ah, but Sordello? 'T is the tale I mean / To tell you" (1:443-444). Absurdity of the forced rhyme aside, Browning's reiteration of the narrator's intent to tell the story—further dramatized by his frequent exclamations, "if I should falter now!"— exasperates the reader because presumably his purpose in reading the poem is to "hear Sordello's story told." When that story is frequently interrupted with these kinds of exclamations, the intent behind the poem becomes unclear: if the narrator cannot tell the story, the reader wonders, what then is his purpose?

In the first seventy-five lines, the narrator attempts to present Verona ("appears / Verona") three separate times before he finally succeeds, having interrupted himself to discuss his poetic method, and having been interrupted by the appearance of the spirit of Shelley. Given that the first line of the poem establishes the expectation that we are "to hear a story told," these repeated interruptions seem counterproductive. If the narrator had not tried to invoke Verona immediately, but had moved into an explanation of his poetic reasoning first, the poem would have increased in clarity with seemingly no sacrifice. It is only as a result of the unsuccessful invocation that the narrator's ability to deliver what he promises comes into question. Because it immediately follows the narrator's request for credibility— "Only believe me. Ye believe?"— this first failed call to Verona makes the reader doubt already that he can deliver the story (1:1,10). The narrator's unusual diction within the interruption itself—that he will "warn" his audience of something before he tells the story— heightens the reader's interest because it implies that what he will mention next is important enough to require caution (1:11). When he

further employs the second person to address the audience personally, the narrator decreases the

distance between him and his audience by appearing to level with us. This familiar treatment, in

conjunction with his diction, makes the reader feel certain the narrator is about to relate

something of extreme interest. What we receive, however, is merely an explanation of the

narrator's poetic method, chosen as a result of his lack of confidence that we can imagine

Sordello without the narrator standing in front, "pointing-pole in hand" (1:30). This letdown of

the reader's expectation intensifies the doubt which his self-interruption has thrown on his ability

to do what he says he will do. Given that the narrator has announced that he will "set [Sordello]

up before [us] and discuss and criticize him in detail" throughout the poem, he gives the

impression that not only would it be better for us to always have his guidance, but that the

halting reading experience he has so far provided is what we should expect until the poem's

conclusion (Duff 26). Eventually, the revelation that he has invoked an audience of the living

and the dead does make the narrator's use of the word "warn" seem warranted; at this point,

though, his ethos has nevertheless been damaged by both the narrative distance between the

warning and the subject and his disheartening promise of the unceasing difficulty of the rest of

the poem.

  Even after the appearance of those whom "death…loves not to unlock", the reader cannot

satisfactorily reestablish confidence in the narrator because he immediately fails to invoke

Verona again— although this defeat results from the appearance of the ghost of Shelley, over

which the narrator presumably has no control (1:53-54). Nonetheless, his use of an exclamation

point here escalates the grandness of his imperative to the effect that its defeat becomes more

noticeable. The appearance of Shelley puts the reader in an unusual position: having been

prevented from hearing "the story" for the last sixty lines, the reader's inclination is to hope that

the narrator can successfully banish the ghost. In spite of so many false steps, the reader is all at once aligned with the narrator by the appearance of an external obstruction to the narrative. Instead, however, the narrator takes the opportunity to try to establish his own place among poets such as Shelley, Aeschylus ("the Athenian"), and Sir Philip Sidney "the starry paladin"; this exposition, though dramatic, separates the reader from the story in drawing the focus to the history of poetry and disappointing his expectation that the narrator will move quickly past this external obstruction (1:65, 68). Problematically, a reader who has thus far doubted the ability of Browning's narrator to deliver on his promises will likely reject his attempt to associate himself with these hallowed poets—particularly on the grounds that he seems unable to tell any story, much less one of such grandeur as *The Aeneid.*

When the narrator successfully calls forth Verona, the poem proceeds with the explanation of how Richard and Azzo have been taken captive by Salinguerra. Immediately afterward, however, the narrator falls back into a series of interruptions in which he brings the reader back to the present, pauses to discuss how it would likely be arduous to attempt to read of this period of history outside of the poem, and then moves to thirty years before the night in Verona to give an obscure political history of the affair (1:187,190-191). Though the reader's expectation might be that this return to the present will include an explanation that will alleviate some of the burden of the poem's comprehension, he is disappointed in this respect. Not only does this revisiting of modern time lead to an even more esoteric historical account, but it breaks off to further burden the reader with the unnecessary metaphor of the worm. Rather than make the history from which the poem originates clearer, here Browning deviates in order to invoke a dramatic moment of simultaneous creation and destruction that fails to enhance the poem as a whole.

As Church argues, the historical obscurity of the story, the sources of which are "locked and sealed to us outsiders," exacerbates the fact that the actual protagonist has not yet appeared (242). For all of the declarations that Sordello's story will be shared, stanza after stanza passes by without even mention of his name, much less depiction of him in action. So far, the reader has had to "[wander] blindfold through what seems at first a hopeless labyrinth" with no reward for his efforts in the form of the actual man whose story is to be shared:

> [We are] to hear a story told: the story begins, stops for a parenthesis, stops for an address to Shelley, proceeds, breaks off, goes back at a jump thirty years, and we…have to find out way to an entirely different scene and different associations, and so, by hints, and pictures, and enigmas, to yet another set of circumstances. (241)

It is perhaps largely due to this halting narrative style, in conjunction with Browning's issues of readability, that Church feels that "nothing can be done with" *Sordello*.

But modern critics have found also some usefulness in these few of Browning's narrative barriers. In his article, "Browning's 'Sordello': Structure through Repetition," Hawthorne argues that the phrase "appears / Verona" acts as a "framing element" throughout the poem's introductory lines (206). For him, its first appearance acts as a device to "gather [the] audience" together around the narrator through the revelation of what he intends to do within the poem. Its second reiteration— the imperative that is interrupted by Shelley— has the dramatic effect of conveying "an orator who has turned from a large audience to speak to a single man…directly referring to the wider audience he has just addressed" (207). The third repetition of "appears / Verona" calls forth only the briefest exposition, setting "the location and time for the story" and

"relating the immediate cause for the action." Thus Hawthorne posits that Browning uses

repeated phrases to transition between "present action and exposition" (207). By marking

"digressive passages as discrete units," Browning helps the reader navigate between the story

and the narrator's commentary on the story. Others, such as Columbus and Kemper, suggest that

these repetitions "begin to presage what is to follow: the story, of course, cannot be told from the

beginning, in chronological order, because properly speaking there is no beginning as there is no

end" (265). This history, they assert, is not simply "as recoverable as yesterday's newspaper,"

but must be immersive, interrupted and unending (263). Such explanations notwithstanding, to

allow such self-interruptions to occur so early in the poem creates a very discouraging

experience for the reader, who will certainly have trouble deciding to read four thousand more

lines if this is what she can expect from the narrator before he even begins to tell the story.

Despite these problems of readability and narrative process, *Sordello* contains beautiful

and poignant imagery that speaks to both Browning's dramatic purpose in writing *Sordello* and

to his eventual poetic success. Countless critics of *Sordello* effervesce over his depiction of an

autumn evening; as A.T. asks, in "The Similes in Browning's *Sordello*," "What could be more

beautiful than [these] lines?"

> That autumn eve was stilled:
>
> A last remain of sunset dimly burned
>
> O'er the far forests, like a torch-flame turned
>
> By the wind back upon its bearer's hand
>
> In one long flare of crimson; as a brand,
>
> The woods beneath lay black. (1:80-85)

This striking image, invoking the sun as dying flame and capturing viscerally the lonely beauty of autumn, reads much like the poetry of Victorian annuals and keepsake books, which often selected poetic excerpts accompanied by relevant pictures. The syntax is clear and straightforward, and only one sentence is enjambed. Because the issues of readability that plague *Sordello* as a whole are not problematic here, the dramatic and beautiful image Browning creates can be appreciated by a more general readership. It is partly because of this clarity that these particular lines from *Sordello* were featured in Philip Gilbert Hamerton's 1885 *Landscape*— a book of pictures and verses that attempts to "trace the influence of landscape on the mind of man" ("Landscape" 210). Ninety years later, these same lines were included in the posthumous printing of Edith Holden's *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* as the selected verse for the month of October. The reader should not assume however, that this sunset does not bear relevance to the overarching narrative; for at this moment in the poem we are also at the dusk of a political conflict. In "Archimagical Fireworks: The Function of Light-Imagery in 'Sordello,'" Elissa Schagrin Guralnick interprets this passage, stating,

> A torch flame, lit upon the arrest of Richard of Saint Boniface, turns back upon
> the bearer's hand in omen of destruction for the Ghibellines who have set it
> burning. For Taurello Salinguerra and his followers, defeat is imminent; and it is
> the encroachment of night upon their miserable cause that the poem *Sordello*
> relates (124).

Thus the vibrant image becomes also a microcosm for the political action of the poem entire. Nevertheless, as Hamerton and Holden indicate, an understanding of this political context is not necessary to appreciate the passage's beauty—a fact which is only further proven by the fact the political context is so inaccessible. Though their purposes were vastly different than Browning's,

Hamerton and Holden's use of this excerpt demonstrates that even in Browning's least popular poem, real loveliness can be clearly seen.

The poem's beautiful moments, however, such as Browning's brief description of "daughters sly and tall / And curling and compliant," are all too often overshadowed either by the reader's struggle to navigate through them or by their inherent absurdity (1:277-278). As one unnamed critic worries in an article published in *The Academy and Literature,* "Browning has…told [Sordello's] story so confusedly that the reader of the poem is apt to be entirely occupied with a problem to be solved, and consequently will leave aesthetic considerations entirely out of sight" (1). Given the arduousness of the poem as a whole, captivating images and similes can create "lull" periods in which the reader may find rest. If nothing else, these moments of description— the "easiest [things in the poem] to understand"—stand as "passages of genuine poetry which shine in ["Sordello's"] pages from amongst a wilderness of cramped sentences and obscure historical references" (Sorley 148). With regard to the occasional absurdity of these moments, that same critic adds that they are "all more or less bizarre in effect and too recondite as regards the sources from which they are drawn" (205). Still, their "daring originality" remains.

One of the most powerful images in Sordello's poetic introduction occurs when the narrator finally succeeds in invoking Verona:

> Lo, the past is hurled
>
> In twain: up-thrust, out-staggering on the world,
>
> Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears
>
> Its outline, kindles at the core, appears
>
> Verona. (1:73-77)

Paradoxically, the narrator's use of the word "Lo" here asks the reader to visualize what seems like a staggeringly non-visual concept, "the past [being] hurled / In twain." By calling up an essentially unimaginable image, Browning associates the appearance of Verona with comparably grand dramatic effect because to witness it involves the achievement of a near impossibility. Similarly, Browning's enjambment here intensifies the drama of the moment; by itself, the line "Lo, the past is hurled" creates the impression that the narrator has enough command over time to force it to move at his whim. When the reader finds that the past has not only been "hurled" but split "in twain," his understanding of the narrator's ability deepens. Powerful though it is, this invocation echoes the absurdity of moments in the poem such as the cliffs and chokeweed metaphor (in which Browning sacrifices sense for dramatic force) because it is counterintuitive at best to assert that one can "hurl" anything into two pieces. Nothing about the act of "hurling" implies that the object being thrown would break apart or would change in shape; conventionally, it is only upon making contact with something that a thrown object would split or break. Because presumably no such collision occurs between the past and any "surface," the poetic action of "[hurling something] in twain" becomes absurd. Nevertheless, this enjambment also reflects the mimetic strategies Browning employs in other parts of the poem, because Browning has split "in twain" the sentence itself. In light of his heretofore failed efforts to call Verona forth, the narrator now seems to imply that the force of this invocation surpasses all of the force of his previous two attempts combined.

Simultaneously, the division of "the past…/in twain" creates a mental focal point on the "middle" of the split, though the concept itself is bizarre to visualize. Immediately, this focus is rewarded with the image of the city "up-thrust, out-staggering on the world." By hyphenating these words in order to prioritize directionality over verb, Browning further dramatizes the

already bizarre mental image. As if to emphasize the difficulty involved in calling up a city from

six hundred years ago, Browning uses the word "staggering," which implies that the city, though

bursting in on the scene, is doing so unsteadily. The narrator's specification that the city comes

out "on the world" implies that we as readers are located in a poetic "world" in which that can

happen; by thus defining the parameters of the realm of the poem on such a large scale,

Browning hints at the kind of holistic experience we as readers are intended to have in reading

Sordello.

Browning's second enjambment, "a darkness rears / Its outline, kindles at the core,

appears / Verona" serves two poetic purposes. One of these is that the enjambment lends to the

dramatic impressiveness of Verona's entrance by rushing its appearance in spite of the fact that it

occurs throughout more than one line. In addition, the repeated pauses within these lines create

an inventory of events, emphasizing the way in which calling up the city is a step-by-step

process for the narrator. This listing contributes to the sense that the narrator bears witness to

what he describes; as Church argues, "we [as readers] feel that we are in strong hands, and with

eyes that have really seen—seen, with keenness, with trouble, with thought" (241). Concurrently,

the narrator's inventory creates the impression that he is now, finally, in control of what is

happening. This reassurance of his "strong hands," in conjunction with the obedient appearance

of the city, renews the reader's confidence in the narrator just as the "story" seems to begin.

Consider also Browning's description of Salinguerra returning to put down the Guelf

uprising:

> Old Salinguerra in the town once more
>
> uprooting, overturning, flame before,
>
> Blood fetlock-high beneath him. Azzo fled;

> Who 'scaped the carnage followed; then the dead
>
> Were pushed aside from Salinguerra's throne (1:159-165)

Though this event occurs in the past tense because it was what led to the capture of Azzo and Count Richard, the narrator's language here echoes the present tense. In his choice not to include a verb in the phrase, "Old Salinguerra in the town once more," Browning creates the impression that the action could be happening at this very moment—an impression that his subsequent use of participles in "uprooting, overturning" only reinforces. The brevity of these phrases, separated by three commas in one single line, heightens the drama of the moment by accentuating almost every word. Because he thus immerses the reader in the scene, Browning is able to intensify the goriness of the image that follows. Interestingly, Browning's participles here mirror the hyphenated words of the Verona metaphor, again underscoring directionality before action and aiding in the reader's visualization of the scene. When he then moves to the phrases, "flame before, / Blood fetlock-high beneath him," Browning reverses the pattern of emphasis he has created. Instead, Browning draws the reader's focus to the more powerful elements of fire and blood—in which the word "fetlock" indicates the extreme goriness of the scene by giving the reader a measure for how high the blood comes up the feet of his horse. In addition to drawing the focus away from the act of riding to the more powerful elements of fire and blood, this reversal marks the beginning of a narrative move away from the implied present into the past: "Azzo fled," etc. At the same time, Browning uses this inversion to widen the focus of the scene by concluding a description of one man on his horse and beginning a description of the larger action of men fleeing and the throne being retaken. But Browning does not merely expand the dramatic action to include all of the men fleeing the bloody scene; in his remark that the dead are

"pushed aside from Salinguerra's throne," Browning engages the dead members of his audience, demonstrating Salinguerra's power to both them and to the reader.

In contrast to some of his monotonous animal metaphors, Browning's simile for the hatred that fills the men of Verona does real justice to his poetic skill. Very soon after the appearance of Verona, the narrator relates:

> Fear had long since taken root
>
> In every breast, and now these crushed its fruit,
>
> The ripe hate, like a wine: to note the way
>
> It worked while each grew drunk! Men grave and grey
>
> Stood, with shut eyelids, rocking to and fro,
>
> Letting the silent luxury trickle slow
>
> About the hollows where a heart should be;
>
> But the young gulped with a delirious glee
>
> Some foretaste of their first debauch in blood
>
> At the fierce news (1:91-100)

As with the cliffs and seaweed metaphor, Browning here uses plant growth as a means of conveying the feelings of men. Unlike that metaphor however, this passage culminates with a description of a common experience—that of drinking alcohol. At the same time, Browning's syntax is straightforward. Thus, the work the reader must engage in to understand the beginning of the passage is not extended dizzyingly but is instead rewarded with a relatable situation and concluded. Browning's concept of fear "[taking] root" and growing to bear fruit intensifies the reader's understanding of its grip over the men in the scene by accentuating the extent to which it lives inside of them without the insulting connotations of the "scum" metaphor. When he next

asserts that the "fruit" fear bears is that of hatred, he demonstrates an intimate understanding of the feelings of aggressive, war-impassioned men that inspires the reader's confidence in him as the narrator. Finally, Browning's choice to use drunkenness as representative of the way men behave when they are consumed by hatred deepens the reader's visceral experience of the moment in an accessible yet dramatic peak.

In his broadening of the metaphor to include the experiences of both the old and the young, the narrator substantiates the reader's faith in his understanding of how men feel. When he exclaims that he is about to make this differentiation however, he risks making the drama of the moment overblown. Duff captures the extent of this incitement when he summarizes, "And note how the wine of hate, the fruit of fear, worked differently in different sets!" (27). On the other hand, the explanation that follows might be compelling enough to excuse the exclamation; in the narrator's perception, the elderly drink of the wine of hate as a "silent luxury, [trickling] slow/ About the hollows where a heart should be." By characterizing these men as lacking a heart, Browning prevents the reader from empathizing with them while simultaneously implying that they are so old that they are beyond the grip of anything but the strongest feelings. This implication, in addition to making the men seem as old as possible, enhances the reader's impression of the rage itself. In keeping with this enormous rage, the narrator then expresses the young men's infatuation with potential bloodshed as being "gulped with delirious glee." Browning's consonance, "letting the silent luxury trickle slow" further produces a sliding poetic feel that echoes the men's metaphoric swallowing—particularly in contrast to the "gulping" of the young, which is also alliterated with a "gulping" hard "g" sound for obvious effect. In designing men with whom the reader is hard-pressed to empathize, Browning boosts the

probability that the reader will identify with the more gentle heart of Sordello himself, who is

first portrayed as gripped by a dream about his lover, Palma.

   In spite of the arresting nature of the wine-hate metaphor itself, we as readers have little

to no context for the scene. Though this inability to relate or place the moment in a larger context

may deepen its visual intensity in the reader's mind, it is nevertheless factually inaccessible. At

this moment in the narrative, only the city of Verona has appeared. It is not until after this scene

and most of an angry conversation between a group of men—over one hundred lines later—that

the Guelf and Ghibelline conflict is outlined in excruciating historical detail. Though Browning

gives a short summary of the news:

> Be it understood,
>
> Envoys apprised Verona that her prince
>
> Count Richard of Saint Boniface, joined since
>
> A year with Azzo, Este's Lord, to thrust
>
> Taurello Salinguerra, prime in trust
>
> With Ecelin Romano, from his seat
>
> Ferrara, -- over zealous in the feat
>
> And stumbling on a peril unaware,
>
> Was captive, trammeled in his proper snare. (1:100-108)

this is merely a list of names with no context or indication of who matters and for what reason.

As many critics complained, the history of Sordello da Goito was not common knowledge, and

Browning, if he was aware of this (having been educated mainly alone at home) did nothing to

help the reader past this hurtle. Accordingly, A.T. remarks,

The reader of the poem has so much to learn before he can put himself at the

proper point of view for attempting to understand it. He must be steeped in the

history of medieval Italy… and he must learn to realize the existence of those

somewhat shadowy yet dominant ideas of the time, the Holy Roman Empire and

the Holy Roman Church in their hypothetically universal sway. No sooner has he

learned all this than he must to some extent unlearn it, as he soon finds that the

history is idealized—that the Sordello of Dante is not the Sordello of Browning—

that the facts have been altered in order that they may be the framework of ideas

applicable to all time. (204)

While some might argue that to provide the scene before the explanation inspires the reader's

curiosity, I would submit that this choice severely diminishes the immediate effect of the

moment. Though this and many other dramatic images and metaphors across the

Sordello's introduction may still stand for themselves in poetic value—as evidenced by their

frequent excerption— all suffer from one of the main afflictions of the poem as a whole:

Browning makes no attempt to exercise proportion in his dramatics; nowhere does he distinguish

between that which is and is not significant.

Like Sordello himself, the poem's narrator "wants dramatic and continuous significance

manifested in everything" (Kwinn 4). Overall, Browning's unrelenting insistence that every

moment in the poem matters and must suffer elaboration generates a spasmodic lack of direction

in the reader's experience with *Sordello*. Take for example, Browning's illumination of the way

in which the Ghibellin Ecelo family originally introduced Imperial influence in Northern Italy;

with much the same overblown drama as in the metaphor of the worm, Browning writes:

…day by day

> Choosing this pinnacle, the other spot,
>
> A castle building to defend a cot,
>
> A cot built for a castle to defend,
>
> Nothing but castles, castles nor an end
>
> To boasts how mountain ridge may join with ridge
>
> By sunken gallery and soaring bridge. (1:262-268)

Repetitive and awkward to read, this stanza's only purpose is to inform the audience that thirty years before this night in Verona, Ecelo "built numberless castles on the hills" with the intention of controlling Northern Italy with the help of the Holy Roman Emperor (Duff 31). In his use of the same seven words across two lines, Browning overestimates the inherent drama of the moment; given that he has just asked the reader to not only bear in mind everything that has happened so far but to temporarily subvert it to an even older history, these kind of rambling poetics do not encourage the reader. In light of the poem's countless other complicated, repetitive and jumbled images, what patience has anyone to continue through passages such as this? Though some, such as Thomas Hodgkin—distinguished member of the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries in 1902 and author of the "Inaugural Address" to the March 1902 edition of the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*— find this quote compelling and excerpt it in their work, most I daresay would not.[4]

The confusion for the reader that these disproportionately dramatic moments create, detrimental enough to the enjoyment of the poem, is increasingly exacerbated by the pomposity of the poem's narrator. As David G. Riede observes, "no matter who speaks in the poem, he seems to exceed his authority" (188). Three of the strongest examples of this are the narrator's attitude toward Dante, his gathering of an audience of the living and the dead, and his treatment

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[4] See "Inaugural Address," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 8.1 (1902): 13.

of the ghost of Shelley. Acknowledging that Dante wrote the first poem about Sordello,

Browning asserts that his goal is to "disentwine the light of a lesser star [Sordello] from a greater

one" (Froula 164). But as Froula points out, Browning's motivation implicitly disparages Dante,

implying that his "affinity with the imperialist aspects of Christianity" obscures Sordello's

rightful glory; thus *Sordello* becomes "a kind of rescue mission," underscored by his repeated

dramatic asides, "if I should falter now!" (164, Browning 1:347, 373). These asides hint at how

seriously the narrator approaches his task, and at how tragic it would be if his ambition was not

achieved. Thus establishing his role in the poem by belittling not only Fate herself but several

well-known poets, the narrator earns Columbus and Kemper's assessment of him as, "arrogant"

and "rather mocking" (265).

During the narrator's first self-interruption, he pauses to not only explain his choice of

method but also to gather his audience:

> Confess now, poets know the dragnet's trick,
>
> Catching the dead, if fate denies the quick,
>
> And shaming her; 't is not for fate to choose
>
> Silence or song because she can refuse
>
> Real eyes to glisten more, real hearts to ache
>
> Less oft, real browns turn smoother for our sake:
>
> I have experienced something of her spite;
>
> But there's a realm wherein she has no right
>
> And I have many lovers. Say, but few
>
> Friends fate accords me? (1:35 – 43)

Although Jack and Smith's annotations to *Sordello* accuse him of merely "[playing] with the fancy of circumventing fate by writing for an audience summoned from the realms of the dead," I would argue that, fancy or otherwise, he does sincerely intend for the reader to imagine himself briefly as part of this mixed audience (196). The narrator's humorous comment, "thou art set, / Clear-witted critic, by…but I'll not fret / A wondrous soul of them, nor move death's spleen," supports my interpretation because it invokes the kind of potential complication that could arise in an audience comprised of the living and the dead (1:51-53). By alarmedly pointing out that a critic is sitting next to a poet who he "handled severely" in life, and then interrupting himself as though to prevent a scuffle from breaking out, the narrator demands that the reader imagine the scene set before him as though it were happening before his eyes (Duff 3). Much as the addition of a detail makes a person's story seem more credible, so does the potential conflict between members of Browning's audience enhance the reader's immersive experience of the scene. Because the narrator does treat this means of acquiring an audience with earnestness, the reader assumes that his treatment of Fate is also in earnest. When he "[shames] her" and declares himself to be outside of her jurisdiction, then, the reader must wonder whether he really has the authority to make such a claim. Though he places himself among all "poets," asserting that "poets [as a group] know the dragnet's trick" of summoning a dead audience, the narrator seems to overstep his role, particularly because he seems to have summoned his mixed audience to spite Fate's power to "[deny] the quick"—to deny him a living audience— because he has "experienced something of her spite" in the past (1:41).

His claim that it is "not for fate to choose" whether anyone will hear Sordello's story, simultaneously makes the poem more interesting and confusing. While anything occurring beyond the hand of Fate must be powerful in itself and thus almost secretive and interesting, the

fact that Fate has no control over it almost delegitimizes it at the same time; any reader familiar with the concept that Fate touches everything could easily feel as though anything Fate does not control must not be worth controlling. The narrator's reasoning, essentially that Fate has real men to govern and thus will leave the story alone, makes Sordello's story seem less important in consequence. Given that many pages will pass before Sordello actually appears, the question of whether his story will be told and whether it even matters could potentially remain with the reader, intensifying as no sign of him emerges. When finally, the narrator complains that he has "experienced something of [Fate's] spite," his audience-generating maneuver speaks less to his intriguing command of poetic authority and more to the idea that he fears her. In this light, his once interesting audience of "brother by breathing brother" becomes merely the only "friends fate [will accord] him." Once the narrator's gesture of gathering a mixed audience of the living and the dead is understood as being motivated by either fear or necessity, its grandness is severely attenuated, leaving the reader unsure about the narrator's majestic attitude and confidence.

In light of the narrator's strange impression on his audience, with particular reference to his second failure to invoke Verona, his brash and self-important treatment of Shelley's ghost seems at best unwarranted and at worst indicative of something akin to unworthiness to tell the story. When Shelley's spirit arrives, the narrator exclaims:

> Then, appear, Verona! Stay—thou, spirit, come not near
>
> Now—not 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 then this is no place for thee!

> The thunder-phrase of the Athenian, grown
>
> Up out of memories of Marathon,
>
> Would echo like his own sword's griding screech
>
> Braying a Persian shield,-- 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! (1:59-71)

At first, these lines give the impression that the narrator is embarrassed about the quality of his poem in comparison to the greatness of the verses of Percy Shelley; he even admits to being "[scared]" presumably by Shelley's purity. This demonstration of fear however, comes at the expense of the audience, whose power to judge the narrator belittles; the implication that only a real poet could be offended by the sound *Sordello*'s verse creates makes the audience seem less capable and less worthy of hearing the story. This implication aggrandizes Shelley partly at the expense of those in the audience who would seem qualified to judge, such as the reader himself, the dead literary critic, and his poet victim. Given that the narrator has recently implied that members of his audience have nothing better to do, after all, than listen to this story—asking, "What else should tempt them back to taste our air / Except to see how their successors fare?"— the narrator's respect for his audience in comparison to his worship of the story seems minute (1:47-48).

Literally, the narrator suggests that even the poetry of Aeschylus and of Sir Philip Sidney would sound like metal scraping metal or loud trumpets to Shelley. By placing himself among these poets, even as he rejects their worthiness in comparison to Shelley, the narrator immediately cancels much of the humility that he seems to be trying to create. And neither is this

the narrator's first such grand comparison; at the poem's very beginning, he places himself on

par with the work of de Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. By choosing the examples of the trumpets

associated with the knightly Sir Philip Sidney's work and the swords in Aeschylus', the narrator

shows little shame at the "griding" quality of his verse; he merely argues that his poem is "no

place" for Shelley. Froula, who classifies the narrator's homage as "equivocal" at best,

summarizes the work of other critics when she states,

> Browning banishes Shelley not merely in order that his idol not witness his
>
> inferior poetizing but because he has in view the more aggressive project of
>
> subjecting Shelley's visionary poetics to a historical trial. (163)

Through this lens, *Sordello* becomes a poem intended "neither to imitate nor to honor Shelley but

to test and revise the dream of 'Imagination's' power" (164). Whether this assertion is accurate,

the fact remains that in agonizing over how he can "play [his] puppets, bear [his] part / Before

these worthies," the narrator presumes that he belongs among them—a contentious declaration.

But the narrator's most obvious and detrimental overstepping comes in his repeated

physical instructions to the reader in the historical present. Though the many other presumptions,

extended metaphors and overemphasized scenes across the poem's introduction burden the

reader, none so frustratingly and narrowly confine him as these commands. Occurring just as we

as the readers finally encounter Sordello for the first time, these imperatives are presumably

intended to heighten the dramatic revelation of the protagonist. In practice, however, this attempt

to direct the reader's imagination second by second can either be completely immersive or

ridiculous; given the difficult nature of the poem thus far, it seems unlikely that the poem would

could immerse any but the most interested reader. Unlike other elements of the poem, this

technique cannot be overcome by sheer reader determination; to become the narrator's literal

puppet requires the kind of trust and dramatic immersion that the narrator has thus far failed to create. Though the imperative historic present, for lack of a better term, does not dominate the poem for several hundred lines, neither should it come as a surprise; it first appears vaguely in the first stanza with the narrator's command, "Only believe me," which, though subtle, foreshadows what is to come. In the midst of the chokeweed and cliffs metaphor, Browning hints again with his parenthetical, "(conceive)."

As if to ease the reader into the new magnitude of burden he will be putting on his shoulders, Browning does provide a transition from the narrator-audience relationship to his puppetmaster-reader relationship in the form of the second person:

> The same night wears. Verona's rule of yore
>
> Was vested in a certain Twenty-four;
>
> And while within his palace these debate
>
> Concerning Richard and Ferrara's fate,
>
> Glide we by clapping doors, with sudden glare
>
> Of cressets vented on the dark, nor care
>
> For aught that's seen or heard until we shut
>
> The smother in, the lights, all noises but
>
> The carroch's booming: safe at last! Why strange
>
> Such a recess should lurk behind a range
>
> Of banquet-rooms? Your finger—thus—you push
>
> A spring, and the wall opens, would you rush
>
> Upon the banqueters, select your prey,
>
> Waiting (the slaughter-weapons in the way,

Strewing this very bench) with sharpened ear

A preconcerted signal to appear;

Or if you simply crouch with beating heart,

Bearing in some voluptuous pageant part

To startle them. Nor mutes nor masquers now. (1:308-327)

The beginning of this passage, in which we return to the night at Verona, strikes the reader as

consistent with the rest of the poem. As the lines progress, the narrator transitions subtly into

both the historic present and the second person simultaneously. Again, he has invoked Verona

only to interrupt it with something else. In this case, the interruption comes in the form of

another type of exposition of the narrator's role. Though in the poem's beginning the interrupted

sections were didactically addressed to the reader, here the reader must assess for himself what it

is about the narrator's approach that has changed.

In his use of the word "we," the narrator not only makes us imagine that he is walking

with us at this very moment but he also informs us that the crowded audience of the living and

dead have been set aside. "[Gliding]…by clapping doors" cannot be achieved by a crowd, and

thus the reader and narrator proceed alone. In emphasis of the stealthy nature of our errand

however, "[lurking]" in dark hallways, hidden and "Safe at last!" the narrator abandons his

companionable position beside the reader and instructs, "Your finger—thus—you push/ A

spring, and the wall opens." As the reader continues through the passage both metaphorically and

literally, it becomes clear that the reader has not actually been asked to "push / A spring," but

merely to imagine what would happen if he did. Though this is confusing in itself, the reader

soon realizes that he has been asked to imagine "[pushing]/ A Spring" in order to ambush a

group of unsuspecting "banqueters" and murder them conspiratorially with someone else in the

group waiting to give "a preconcerted signal." Arguably, in its similarity to the scene in the

Odyssey in which Odysseus slaughters all of Penelope's suitors at dinner, this moment generates

poetic drama. On the other hand, what emotional reaction can the reader have to being asked

temporarily to fill the shoes of a premeditated murderer?

Though the two prospects are in no way equal, the narrator also offers the idea that

instead of waiting to slaughter banqueters, the reader might imagine himself as participating in a

prank to startle them. So lighthearted does this option seem, that all of the drama generated by

the misplaced Odyssey-esque massacre is immediately extinguished. When, finally, the narrator

reveals that the banquet-rooms are empty ("Nor mutes nor masquers now"), the reader cannot

help but be perplexed at the whole imaginative exercise. At best, a tentative argument could be

made for the way in which morbid curiosity ironically makes the narrator seem more realistic,

because those types of thoughts are common to every person to some extent. Still, the most

pragmatic argument would be that the exercise is simply irrelevant. With no explanation in any

case, the narrator seems to become distracted by the sight of Sordello in the next room and

abandons the entire topic.[5]

Immediately after our initial introduction to Sordello, Browning returns to the imperative

dramatic present. As the reader arrives at a palace, he commands,

> …Pass within.
>
> A maze of corridors contrived for sin,
>
> Dusk winding-stairs, dim galleries got past,
>
> You gain the inmost chambers, gain at last

---

[5] Although the initial impression of the lines in which Sordello appears, lines 340-348, confusingly refer to both Sordello and to Dante—who is implied by "Florentine" (348) — it is Sordello that sleeps in the scene, not Dante. In the line, "Sordello, thy forerunner, Florentine!" Browning addresses Dante, asserting that because Sordello was a poet, he is a forerunner of Dante (1:348). Unfortunately, without the knowledge that Sordello is a poet, many readers assume incorrectly that the Dante, not Sordello, is the sleeping figure.

A maple-panelled room… (1:389-392)

Unlike the experience with the spring, these lines seem to literally guide the reader down a set of corridors. The flashing images, "a maze of corridors," "dusk winding-stairs," and "dim galleries got past," create the poetic experience of actually walking through a palace, albeit by glimpses rather than one continuous sight. The frequent pauses of these lines, in addition to resembling the rhythm of footsteps, achieve a hurrying effect culminating in Browning's phrase, "gain at last / a maple-panelled room." In a subsequent passage of imperative historic present, Browning repeats this technique, urging "but quick / to the main wonder now" (1:405-406).Clearly, though we are meant to see the palace "as [Sordello] sees it," we are not meant to linger. Although this passage is more accessible than the previous one by virtue of its straightforwardness, it nevertheless echoes the previous morbid sentiment. Browning's comment, as Duff summarizes it, that the "maze of corridors" are "fit places for dark deeds," seems as macabre and needless as the imagined massacre (14). By working to tempt the reader into thinking more darkly, the narrator seems to draw on an endless capacity for overdramatizing and elaborating on everything we encounter.

As a whole, this bundle of compelling but questionable poetic techniques— including issues of readability and narrative process as well as a burdensome, pompous narrator— has been interpreted by critics in a variety of ill-fitting but hopeful ways. Aside from the conviction that Browning merely had promise or was a failure, the earliest attempt to categorize Browning on the basis of these and others of his early poetics labeled him as a "Spasmodic Poet." The Spasmodic School of Poetry—thus named in ridicule by William Edmondstoune Aytoun—was a group of heavily Byronic poets including, Sydney Dobell, Alexander Smith, and Philip James Bailey that enjoyed some popularity during the transition between "romantic" and "Victorian"

poetry (Kennedy and Hair 68). Jerome Hamilton Buckley frames them as prizing "irregularity of

form," and seeking to "open their Goethe without closing their Byron" (44). Now forgotten, the

Spasmodic school once entertained a large readership, including the Brownings themselves;

frequently, contemporary critics would attempt to categorize Elizabeth Barrett's *Aurora Leigh* as

in the Spasmodic vein. This group, unwilling to abandon "their avowed 'romantic' masters,"

inherited from Shelley and from Byron a view of art in which "the poet [is] a divinely inspired

creature with an inalienable right to eccentricity, a right to despise the conventions that bound

other men and to indulge a brooding genius in studied self-absorption" (Buckley 42). Though the

narrator himself seems self-absorbed, some critics extend this quality to Browning; many

modern critics recognize and sometimes praise the autobiographical elements of *Sordello*

(Latane 99).In this seeming self-absorption, in conjunction with his ambition that *Sordello* would

inspire and compel the reader's participation from beginning to end, Browning certainly seems to

fit this mode.

Even a cursory examination of the priorities of Spasmodic poets reveals explanations for

countless critics' problems with *Sordello*. Take for example, Dowden's assertion that,

> The truth is, Mr. Browning has given too much in his couple of hundred pages;
>
> there is not a line in the poem which is not as full of matter as a line can be; so
>
> that if the ten syllables sometimes seem to start and give way under the strain, we
>
> need not wonder. We come to no places in *Sordello* where we can rest and dream
>
> or look up at the sky. Ideas, emotions, images, analyses, descriptions, still come
>
> crowding on. (518)

How well this complaint fits with Buckley's assertion that, though the Spasmodics "often

produced striking figures of speech, compelling metaphors, suggestive similes, they were

repeatedly carried away...by their own embellished images" (43). Through this lens, the cliffs

and chokeweed metaphor, the "up-thrust, out-staggering" city, the "castles without end" find

justification; Browning did not so much overestimate the determination of his reader as get swept

away by "the appeal of quaint and curious lore" (43). Even modern critics, who analyze *Sordello*

to their own purposes, unintentionally confirm this Spasmodic vein; Kwinn observes, "Sordello

searches for a major turning point that will lead him to divine truth, but he cannot strike a

balance among poetry, politics and nature" (4). Thus burdened by "pedantic concern with

specific detail," Buckley points out that the Spasmodics "hardly…needed an agile satirist to

expose the weakness of [their] art" (53). To whatever extent the failures of *Sordello* match the

failures and exuberancies of the Spasmodics, however, in at least one respect Browning stands

alone. Though he frequently "[magnifies] isolated emotions" and "[embroiders] random

sentiments often quite irrelevant to the given mood," Browning was never "uncertain of [his]

ultimate design" (Buckley 43). Even as he criticizes *Sordello*, Church recognizes that it

"[presents] in dim and imperfect outline a great and profound idea, struggling to disclose itself"

(253). Though his style is "abrupt, dislocated, interrupted, incomplete, [and] allusive,"

Browning sets out to tell a story and he accomplishes it (242).

  As an alternative to characterizing *Sordello* as a Spasmodic piece, critic Thomas J.

Collins posits that *Sordello* is a "synthetist" poem. In his essay, "The Poetry of Robert

Browning: A Proposal for Reexamination," Collins argues that modern criticism of Browning

has "locked us into habits of thought which have become barriers to comprehending the total

'shape' of his verse" (326). Distracted by the bizarreness of his language and his other

outrageous techniques, we as readers miss its larger intent. Synthetist poetry, as Collins describes

it, is "a poetry of probing, of internalization, a poetry which communicates through verbal

precision, intense concentration, tonal nuance, and suggestiveness" (330). On the basis of these

qualities, "there can be little doubt that, at this stage of Browning's career, the poetic ideal for

which he strove, the most perfect instrument of poetic expression, was, for him, synthetist

poetry" (331). Such is the method, Collins asserts, that Browning lays out at the beginning of the

poem, presenting the story as something which we must "watch," "hear," and "believe," and

praising that poetic style in which himself "kept out of view," we as readers are "[left]…to say

the rest for him" (1:17). By thus idolizing a style in which all of the conventions of poetry are set

aside, Browning attempts to create, "a poetic form in which externals are cast away, in which

there is an investigation of the internal state of a composite nature" (330). Though some

complain that this endeavor leads only to lack of coherence and structure, Collins replies that

Browning deliberately "refuses to structure language in *Sordello* because he believes the

experience can't be structured" (334). What coherence Browning sacrifices in loyalty to his goal

must be compensated for by the participation of the reader. In Synthetist poetry as in *Sordello*,

"the poet is replaced by an involved, hard-working and creative audience" for the purpose of

achieving a transcendent experience rather than merely reading (330).

  Critics Columbus and Kemper share a similarly lofty understanding of Browning's

purpose; as they argue, the poem could have told Sordello's story chronologically in six hundred

simple lines, but to have done so would "exclude consciousness: Sordello's, the Speaker's, the

audience's" (263). Like Faulkner eighty years and a continent away, what Browning captures in

his "six thousand entangled lines" is, "the reflexive activity of consciousness concerned with

itself" (264). Because, "the relationship of a mind with its subject is endless," Columbus and

Kemper champion the interminability of *Sordello* as both deliberate and effective. The clarity

that a different poetic style would have afforded would have robbed the poem of its intended

effect, for Browning "made no attempt to be clear." This assertion is confirmed by a letter

between William G. Kingsland and Browning, in which Browning writes, " I never pretended to

offer such literature as should be substitute for a cigar or a game at dominoes to an idle man"

(Kingsland 15). The clarity that so many critics and frustrated readers wanted, Columbus and

Kemper insist, "could no more convey what Browning was attempting to say than synopsis can

convey the meaning of Blake's *Jerusalem* or even the smallest part of its magnificence." (253).

Sordello's is a story, they believe, "that was meant to go on and on as though it could never end"

because it "must be experienced to be understood" (264, 253).

Necessarily, however, the "experience" of *Sordello* demands much more than would

usually be expected of the reader. As Froula also sees, from its first line, *Sordello* reveals the

type of development Browning had in mind: by preventing the readers from casual skimming,

Browning "demands that his listeners be active, *will*ing [sic] creators" of the story (Froula 163).

Thus, "who will, may hear Sordello's story told" becomes less a truism than a challenge: who is

determined enough will hear Sordello's story told. But an active readership is only the first step

toward Browning's ultimate ambition to use *Sordello* to make "the connection between poetry

and life palpable" (179). In order for the readers to become the creators of the story, Browning

must "divest himself" of his privileged role as the poem's director, and thus "elicit the exercise

of authority from his audience" (163). Through means such as his Quixotic attempt, Browning

strips himself of his own authority in the hope of not only empowering his readership, but

uniting them. As Froula sees, it is only through the creation of a collaborative authority that

Browning can call into question "the poet's traditional role as mediator between audience and

transcendence" (179).

Froula argues that the call for active readers arises out of Browning's desire to "bring into being a collaborative authority that puts in question the poet's traditional role as mediator between audience and transcendence." By "[confounding] both the living and the dead" Browning "hopes by *Sordello* to inspire these materially breathing brothers to a body politic" (179). United by the confusion and difficulty, Browning's readers participate in "a symbolic rejection of the force of convention that makes acquiescence easy." Though the readers join forces against the poem, such collaboration, if successful, would nevertheless elevate *Sordello* in poetic significance. Ultimately, Froula argues, Browning hoped that by empowering his readers, he could "make the connection between poetry and life palpable." Browning wanted "his words to be made flesh" (179). Though some insist that Browning brought "abuse and neglect on his own head by writing a poem that was simply too difficult for a popular audience to read," Froula sees *Sordello* as an effort to "prove the possibility of communion independent of transcendence and convention alike" (180). In spite of the poem's failure, critics such as Froula and G. K. Chesterton see it as an optimistic hint about Browning's future; as Chesterton argues,

> outward obscurity is in a young author a mark of inward clarity. A man who is vague in his ideas does not speak obscurely, because his own dazed and drifting condition leads him to clutch at phrases like ropes and use the formulae that everyone understands (38)

It is this logic, ultimately, that led Chesterton to remark that Sordello is, "the most glorious compliment that has ever been paid to the average man" (24).

Though each of these interpretations illuminates and explains various difficult aspects of *Sordello*, Browning's biographical situation at the time of *Sordello*'s composition demonstrates that Browning had already failed to estimate how accessible and interesting his writing would be

to an audience with *Strafford*. When Browning fully devoted his efforts to *Sordello*, he did so in the aftermath of the failure of this play. Similarly historical in nature, *Strafford* dramatized the life of the Earl of Strafford, "the chief counselor of Charles I, who had been impeached by Parliament and executed for treason under a bill of attainder signed by the ungrateful king" (Kennedy and Hair 53). The complexity and obscurity of this story, however, in conjunction with Browning's lack of experience as a playwright, led to the play's ultimate failure (55). The audience, who "could be expected to be familiar with many aspects of the Civil war," could not at all be expected to "be knowledgeable about all the details of the historical situation or the identity of obscure political figures such as Rudyard, Saville, Fiennes, and Holland" (56). Thus the play saw only five performances; when one of the cast members, Mr. Vanderhoff, indelicately accepted a role in a different work during the run of *Strafford,* the play's commissioner, Mr. William Charles Macready felt that he had done his duty by Browning in producing the play, and did not recast the role. Browning, frustrated with the entire process— particularly the days in which Macready and his partner cut and wrote in scenes for the play themselves—declared that he would never write another play (58).

Interestingly, subsequent complaints about the play perfectly mirror complaints that Browning received about *Sordello*: "the basic conflicts…are clogged with details and with oblique references," "Browning…lacked an understanding of what an audience could absorb," "the dialogue sputters forth in abrupt speech and unfinished thoughts," and "actions are sometimes introduced suddenly and without explanation" (Kennedy and Hair 56). The reader of *Sordello* sympathizes with Macready when he laments in his diary "the want of connection in the scenes in Browning's play" (57). The similarities between the problems of *Strafford* and of

Sordello to me indicate a consistency in Browning's artistic intentions; with the elements of a play in mind, moments in *Sordello* achieve a new significance.

For example, Browning's deliberate gathering of an audience might be seen as a lesson learned from *Strafford*; if he could not command a crowd for the play, he can use the extended imaginative possibilities poetry affords to generate one for his poem. In the way in which his audience is composed of the living and dead, "summoned together from the world's four ends, / Dropped down from heaven or cast up from hell" they become universal and timeless. No matter where people are, where they are from, whether they are living or otherwise, they are invited or commanded, rather, to hear Sordello's story told (1:32-33). In his assertion that we in the crowd are his "friends," compensating for the "few friends Fate accords [him]," the narrator draws us even closer to the story. Similarly, plays constantly use the method that Browning champions as most agreeable in poetry, by "making speak…the very man as he was wont to do" in the form of actors on stage. The context of the theatre may also be used to help explain some of Browning's more challenging images; it is much simpler to imagine the special effects involved in raising city-shaped props on a darkened stage than it is to visualize the past "up-thrust, out-staggering" (1:74). With the stage as a tool, a narrator could easily transition between time periods, six hundred years ago or thirty years before that, using physical cues in the form of props to aid the reader in following the narrative; as Church brilliantly and unwittingly affirms, the images of *Sordello* "follow like slides in a magic lantern" (241). By asking the reader of *Sordello* to achieve this theatrical feat mentally, Browning breaks beyond the traditional barriers of poetry— but only for those who are capable of complying. On the stage, the scene in which the Veronese men "drink" the wine of hate, becomes more easily imaginable and similarly powerful; the insight that the poem provides in the form of the extended metaphor of fear growing into hate,

however, achieves the most dramatic impact in written form. Thus Browning seems to navigate both of these realms in order to selectively incorporate their most effective elements.

In drawing from his experience with *Strafford* in *Sordello*, Browning acts within a process—likely initiated with his first long poem, *Paracelsus*— that would eventually lead him to the dramatic monologue. As Buckley asserts, "However much he would continue to value Shelley's Platonic ideal, [Browning's] own best poetry was to be rooted in a grasp of concrete dramatic detail" (23). Froula also sees the dramatic monologue as "a development from the impossible *Sordello*, translating Sordello's project into a different and far more accessible form" (180). Moving away from the chaos of *Sordello*, Browning uses the dramatic monologue to "[enable] the reader, speaker and poet to be located at an appropriate distance from each other, aligned in such a way that readers must work *through* the words of the speaker toward the meaning of the poet themselves" ("Robert Browning" 1229). In spite of how neatly these explanations tie up *Sordello* and place it on a shelf to be forgotten, Browning's shift to the dramatic monologue form, however successful, required him to sacrifice much of what makes *Sordello* such a brilliant and poignant failure. Primarily, he had to severely limit what he could reasonably ask of his reader. As Maynard argues in "Reading the Reader in Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues," Browning "learned the limits of his real readers by the reception of Sordello" and brought into his monologues, "a collection of very ordinary readers" (73). Though this undoubtedly makes his poems easier to follow—lending to Tucker's classification of the dramatic monologue as "an exemplary teaching genre"— it means the death of Browning's loftier beliefs about what the reader could accomplish with a little toil (33). Even as Maynard sees the monologue as "a poetic gadget to provoke reader response" more economically and effectively than in *Sordello*, he simultaneously recognizes the loss of "the palpable hold he takes

of readers and the reader in [that poem]" (74). I would not, however, go as far as Collins in his

declaration that

> the dramatic monologue form is a retreat for Browning, not a victory. The
>
> monologue is a poetic form which allows Browning to reach an audience, which
>
> allows him to be a poet of his time…[but which] lessens the psychological
>
> intensity of [poems like] *Sordello.* (332,336)

In his shift to the monologue, Browning exemplifies what would have happened to many

Spasmodic poets; if they had only "been content with the smaller instruments of verse:" "they

might have secured more durable effects" (Buckley 43). Unlike the Spasmodics, Browning did

not "[remain] a minor poet failing in a major key," but rose to become one of our most esteemed

Victorians.

I cannot forget, though, that Browning's move to the dramatic monologue is also a move

away from the dream of *Sordello*. Though the poem's greatest problem is that of comprehension,

we must remember that this problem not accidental: "it is central. Browning is working with the

self-conscious mind grappling with itself, a process of shadow and dream and possibility"

(Kingsland 99). However long and arduous, *Sordello* does not fail in that regard; critics such as

Park, who conclude that "*Sordello* is merely a laboratory of poetic devices" on the premise that

"a work which has not been understood is a failure" do not do *Sordello* justice. The metaphor of

the laboratory implies that the "experiments" being conducted are more valuable in what they

helped Browning to achieve in future works than in themselves. To thus reduce *Sordello* to a

collection of experiments is to diminish not only Browning's achievements within the poem, but

also the value of the poem itself. Nevertheless, I do not disagree with the aspect of Park's

metaphor that indicates that moments within the poem, like experiments, should be examined

individually. No matter what approach one takes with *Sordello*, its issues of readability and navigability cannot be ignored; the poem drains its reader and inhibits him from appreciating it as a whole.

As I have argued, if any analogy can do *Sordello* justice, it would be that of an overcrowded museum. In this metaphor, Park's "experiments" become "exhibits"—a word which lends the poignant moments within *Sordello* with what I see as more inherent value because the word "exhibits" does not connote failure in the way abandoned "experiments" do. The metaphor of the museum carries over from the laboratory metaphor the concept of examining the displays of Browning's technique on an individual basis, while better characterizing the issues of navigability that hinder the reader from conducting these examinations. Ultimately, I do not see the overcrowded syntax and halting narrative process of *Sordello* as diminishing the value of the poetics it sometimes contains. Just as poor navigability in a museum does not impact the value of the artifacts within it— even as it discourages and exhausts its visitors—neither should the poem's problems of readability impact the way in which we value what Browning has created within it.

Sordello, as Collins asserts, is a poem of "probing"; it demands that we participate in spite of the obstacles set before us (330). Ironically, even critics that acknowledge that *Sordello* is "an activity of consciousness concerned with itself" dismiss these obstacles of readability as a simple oversight—Browning's misunderstanding of what he could expect of his audience— or as a deliberate attempt to make the poem difficult to read (Columbus and Kemper 264). While these explanations do play a part in *Sordello*, to limit ourselves to them is to ignore Browning's own role within his poem. Though Columbus and Kemper acknowledge that a simpler version of *Sordello* would "exclude [the consciousnesses of]" Sordello, the Speaker, and the audience,"

they fail to recognize that the poem is fundamentally an activity of Browning's consciousness "concerned with itself" (263,264). As Collins argues about synthetist poetry, *Sordello* embodies an "investigation of [an] internal state"; although Sordello, the Speaker, and the audience participate to various degrees in their own self-investigations, it is from Browning's self-investigation that we stand to gain the most (330). Thus the impassability of the poem as a crowded museum speaks to Browning's own efforts to understand himself as a poet at the time of its composition. It is perhaps for this reason that he chose Sordello, a poet, as his protagonist. Through the trial of reading *Sordello*, then, we witness and experience for ourselves part of the development of Browning's poetic identity.

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