Robert Browning’s “Sordello”
A Moral Epic for Poets

In his epic poem “Sordello,” a masterpiece of psychological and linguistic complexity, Robert Browning explores in detail some things he himself at the time was struggling with as a poet, that is, the poet’s duty to himself, his fellow man, and his art. He also explores the errors and pitfalls of a poet’s life as he searches for an identity and a means to embody it in the poem. In many ways, Sordello, the minor, thirteenth-century Troubadour, mirrors Browning’s own self. For the poet, with the emergence of a concept of the self comes a determination of its relation to the outside world, and the finding of an audience for his poems, as well as a concern over their reception. In the first book, Browning, after beginning the poem with an invocation of the various poets of the past, including Shelley and Sidney, begins to trace the emergence of the soul of the poet. This is how Browning initially introduces the reader to Sordello:

Look, now he turns away! Yourselves shall trace
(the delicate nostril swerving wide and fine,
A sharp and restless lip, so well combine
What that calm brow) a soul fit to receive
Delight at every sense; you can believe
Sordello foremost in the regal class
Nature has broadly severed from her mass
Of men, and framed for pleasure, as she frames
Some happy lands, that have luxurious names,
For loose fertility.

It is significant that we encounter Sordello turning away from us, the readers, which suggests a kind of insecurity on his part, even shyness. Sordello is described as someone who has the appearance of being from “the regal class” and belonging to those men, “framed for pleasure” like those “happy lands, that have luxurious names.” But this “appearance” is complicated by the fact of his lowly birth. Sordello, against the fate prescribed by his birth, intends to “laugh” at it and “soar to heaven’s complexest essence, rife / With grandeurs, unaffronted to the last, / Equal to being all!”

We find him alone, wandering the various halls of a castle in the region of Goito. Here, he lives in a world of dreams, where he is the architect of each fantasy, and where doubt cannot intrude since he is, “so fenced about / From most that nurtures judgement, — care and pain.” In the absence of any relation to real life, or any experience of real pain or joy, he has no reason to question his own dreams or to measure them against a sense of the real. In such a case, the aesthete is born; he who lives divorced from any concerns about the outside world, living in a fantasy land completely under his control. And thus, vanity is inherent in such men as Sordello:

Souls like Sordello …
Coerced and put to shame, retaining will,
Care little, take mysterious comfort still,
But look forth tremulously to ascertain
If others judge their claims not urged in vain,
And say for them their stifled thoughts aloud.
So, they must ever live before a crowd.

With no way in which to measure his own worth, he looks forward, “tremblingly” to seek out the judgement of others, an audience to validate his own sense of himself. He is soon bored with his bucolic surroundings and begins to fantasize about his position in the world by studying the characteristics of those he believes are noble and strong. He “Betakes himself to study hungrily /

Just what the puppets his crude phantasy / Supposes notetablest,—popes, kings, priests, knights” Of course, his crude phantasies cannot offer realistic portraits of these figures of strength to counter his own weak sense of a self. His only interaction with something outside himself, alone in the castle, has been with statues of women, whom he imagines, “like priestesses because of sin impure / Penanced for ever, who reigned endure, / having once drunk sweetness to the dregs.” Each night he “begs pardon for them.” Like a hierophant, Sordello absolves the “noiseless girls” of their imagined sin of excessive desire. Perhaps Sordello is imagining the repentance of a desire that lies repressed inside himself, and about which he is barely conscious. At this point his desires cannot find an outlet.

The soul of the poet emerges as he imagines himself in the world with a desire to realize his dreams. But Sordello’s desire is not for self-actualization but rather to acquire fame and power. In order to do this, he must embody his thoughts in action, otherwise they remain the stuff of dreams:

’Tis beside
Only a dream; and though I must abide
With dreams now, I may find a thorough vent
For all myself, acquire an instrument
For acting what these people act; my soul
Hunting a body out may gain its whole
Desire some day!
Sordello believes this embodiment of his soul in action will lead to the full realization of his repressed desires. So he adopts a suitable name: Apollo, a name synonymous with human perfection, which for him means the realization of his full potential.

He finds a chance to test his power as a poet in a competition with Eglamor, the elderly distinguished poet. Surprisingly, Sordello wins the prize and dethrones him, who, overcome with envy and spite dies soon after. Browning describes the competition in the following way:

On flew the song, a giddy race,
After the flying story; word mad leap
Out word, rhyme — rhyme; the lay could barely keep
Pace with the action visibly running past:
Both ended.

His friend and companion, Naddo, is aghast: Sordello has won! Perhaps Naddo knows something about Sordello’s disposition that Sordello is unaware of and that is why he is “aghast.” As a result of his victory, he wins the love of Palm, and becomes her minstrel. She places her scarf around his neck, “speaking some six words and no more. / He answered something, anything.” Sordello receives from this a validation of his self-worth from the world. It helps him, “to find / A beauty in himself,”

for, see, he soared
By means of that mere snatch, to many a hoard
Of fancies; as some falling cone bears soft
The eye along the fir-tree-spire, aloft
To a dove’s nest.

His imagination soars in his new-found confidence about himself and his poem. This poem, which Browning describes as “a snatch,” a merely good poem, in Sordello’s mind, becomes something more, something that leads to fantasies which inflame his mind about his own sense of himself. But this feeling
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cannot last since it is born of vanity rather than genuine confidence. Browning describes the problem in this way:

So distinct and far above
Himself, these fancies! He, no genius rare,
Transfiguring in fire or wave or air
At will, but a poor gnome that, cloistered up
In some rock-chamber with his agate cup,
His topaz rod, his seed-pearl, in these few
And their arrangement finds enough to do
For his best art. Then, how he loved that art!
Him with his hopes and fears; so fain of old
To leave the story of his birth untold.

Like an aesthete, trapped in a fantasy world, with his “agate cup,” his “topaz rod,” his “seed-pearl,” his art is just like those beautiful objects he is surrounded by, like those “noiseless girls” in his castle; he lives in a rarefied and privileged environment of his own creation and so his art lacks the life blood of reality. And so, in this false paradise “spite the fantastic glow / Of his Apollo-life,” he hears “a certain low / And wretched whisper, winding through the bliss, / Admonished, no such fortune could be his, / All was quite false and sure to fade one day.” He remains unsure of himself and questions his vocation as a poet to the extent that his dreams seem to fade. “In short, / Apollo vanished,” and Sordello, emotionally ill-equipped to confront reality, must choose an alternative.

But he is impatient; instead, he is “Content with unproved wits and failing frame, / In virtue of his simple will, to claim / that mastery such dreams allot, / no less — to do his best / with means so limited, and let the rest / Go by,— the seal was set.” Nevertheless, he holds on to what remains of his fantasy world. He will now fashion a poetry that will please the crowds. He is unable to do anything else. His identity has not been fully realized and he continues to be informed by the will of the people. It is they who dictate what he will write since he is unable to express anything inside himself:
Be mine mere consciousness! Let men perceive
What I could do, a mastery believe,
Asserted and established to the throng
By their selected evidence of song
Which now shall prove, what’er they are, or seek
To be, I am — whose words, not actions speak,
Who change no standards of perfection, vex
With no strange forms created to perplex,
But just perform their bidding and no more,
At their own satiating-point give o’er,
While each shall love in me the love that leads
His soul to power’s perfection. Song, not deeds,
(for we get tired) was chosen.

Words, not action. But he realized that previously he had welded “words into the crude / mass from the new speech round him, till a rude / Armour was hammered out”: such a poetry is insincere; it is like an “armour” around his desire; he is unable to freely express himself. He seeks a new language, a different kind of poem. Browning describes Sordello’s struggle, similar to his own:

Piece after piece that armour broke away,
Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
As language: thought may take perception’s place
But hardly co-exist in any case,
Being its mere presentment — of the whole
By parts, the simultaneous and the sole
By the successive and the many. Lacks
The crowd perception?

This new kind of poetry is colloquial and metaphysical, complex, dissonant; but it proves unpopular with the people.¹ Sordello

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¹ Browning himself faced a backlash when Sordello was published in 1840. He had initially described the poem, before its publication, as “popular.” In
Sordello is disappointed and realizes that he had “strewed / A fairy dust upon that multitude,” while feigning, “to take them by themselves.” He had “Sublimed their faint applause.” Sordello’s victory in the competition with Elgamor begins to lose its importance in his life as he realizes how fickle the tastes of the public are. Having sought validation and possibly assistance from the public for his work, he is now disillusioned and unsure of what to do next, feeling “Remote as ever from the self-display / He meant to compass, / hampered every way / by what he hoped assistance.” He wonders, “Wherefore then / Continue, make believe to find in men / A use he found not.” His work has met with disapproval from the public, but the fault is his own. His attempt to garner such praise in order to feel validated was the source of his error.

The poet now, after having lived in a world of fantasy and encountered the world with unrealistic desires, has no choice but to “vanish utterly” into his solitude, having been “Sundered in twain; each spectral part at strife / With each; one jarred against another life; / The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man / Who sauntered forth in dream,”

Dressed any how, nor waited mystic frames,
Immeasurable gifts, astounding claims,
But just his sorry self?

Sordello now has to face himself, stripped of appearances, “mystic frames,” and “immeasurable gifts” and finds in the absence of these trappings, “just his sorry self.” As a poet, he dwelled in the world of dreams and fancies, such that his life is now in conflict with the life of a man of action; as Sordello the Man, he was in conflict with Sordello the Poet. So Sordello’s “soul, / Unequal to

Book Three of Sordello, Browning enters the poem and writes the following to his readers: “Still, neither misconceive my portraiture / Nor undervalue its adornments to allure; / What seems a fiend perchance may prove a saint. / Ponder a story ancient pens transmit, / Then say if you condemn me or acquit.”
the compassing a whole, / Saw, in a tenth part, less and less to strive /About."

Nevertheless, Sordello decides to seek a place in the world. He has given up on poetry, “He lost the art of dreaming.” He desires now to create a relation to the world as a man of action. He contemplates his present situation. Before, he was “Handsomely reckless, full to running-o’er / Of gallantries; ‘abjure the soul, content / With body, therefore!’” Now thinking about the soul, he realizes, “To balance ethereality, / Passions were needed; foiled he sank again.” Unable to experience real passions as a man of action, he is unable to balance the ethereal desires that were growing in him as he fantasied while wandering alone in the castle. But, “The Body, the Machine for Acting Will, / Had been at the commencement proved unfit; / That for Demonstrating, Reflecting it, / Mankind — no fitter: was the Will / Itself / In fault?” He questions his will, his ability to actualize his desires and becomes disillusioned with the world. He returns to his statues, those “noiseless girls,” and pressing his forehead on the “moonlit shelf / Beside the youngest marble maid awhile; / ‘I shall be king again!’ as he withdrew / The envied scarf; into the font he threw / His crown.” His desire to be recognized as a poet by the crowd and, even though he won the competition, was vain and narcissistic, and motivated by fame and power. Thus he could not be satisfied even though he defeated Elgamor. Such a defeat, and with Elgamor’s death, simply reminded him that all things pass in time, and as his desire was for a greatness, fed by his dreams, which would prove eternal, he substituted his idea of the poet for that of the hero.

And so, Sordello must forsake his past intentions as false: “A dream is o’er, / And the suspended life begins anew.” His experience as a poet taught him that it is better to “be unrevealed / than part revealed.” He could not resolve the dichotomy of the Man and the Bard, and, exhibiting his preference for one, he abjures the other. And the world in response to his neglect, rushes in: “How eyes, once with exploring bright, grew dim / and satiate with receiving” and “nature’s and his youth gone, / They left the world to you, / and wished you joy.”
In conversation with his lover, Palma, Sordello critically reflects on his youth, when he believed he could exchange ignorance for knowledge, and

Could e’en have penetrated to its core
Our mortal mystery, yet — fool — forbore,
Preferred elaborating in the dark
My casual stuff, by any wretched spark
Born of my predecessors, though one stroke
Of mine had brought the flame forth!

What kept Sordello from fully realizing his potential as a poet was perhaps that repressed desire I spoke of in relation to the statues. Even in the above passage he is partly blind to his vanity and arrogance.

But, nevertheless, as a man of action he advances forward with the people in mind, wondering first how to make the people happy. His project is now, as one of the people, himself, to manage the people. He invokes in his mind the Pope and the Emperor, but in effect,

Sordello only cared to know
About men as a means whereby he’d show
Himself, and men had much or little worth
According as they kept in or drew forth
That self.

Others think Sordello shallow in this regard. He is unable to account for the differences he sees between the people and himself, his own exalted position. Thusly he imagines the people as belonging to a City of God, where Christianity would be the unifying religion, where Rome would be, “the point of light whence rays / traversed the world.” This vision of a united people under the Pope in Rome was just the extension of a dream to give “his thought consistency among / The very people.” It is simply another dream and “proud conception” that fails to materialize. But Sordello doesn’t realize the false path he’s on
yet and fails to read “the black writing—that collective man / outstrips the individual.” And furthermore, that there is no such thing as a “whole and perfect Poet.” At last Browning writes,

All’s at an end: A Troubadour suppose
Mankind will class him with their friends or foes?
A puny uncouth ailing vassal think
The world and him bound in some special link?
Abrupt the visionary tether bust.

In a tense moment of indecision about his future, he gives a reading and something incredible happens: “what was stored / bit by bit through Sordello’s life, outpoured / That eve, was, for that age, a novel thing.” Something breaks through in Sordello’s writing, an emotion long repressed, and he becomes expressive, creating a “novel thing” for the age. Around him, “the People formed a ring / of visionary judges whose award / He recognized in full.” Browning writes about Sordello’s reading: “A reason why the phrases flowed so fast / Was in his quite forgetting for a time / Himself in amazement.” Sordello is a success, “the sad walls of the presence-chamber died into the distance” and “crowds of faces … deep clustered round / Sordello, with good wishes.” He finally realizes the mistake of his “past career’s outrageous vanity” and finds support in the People. “The singer’s life” was no longer “neath / The life his song exhibits” but equal to it.

Sordello is also given the Imperial emblem and becomes the head of the House of Romano. But it is not enough, and he throws it onto the floor, and with that comes a final illumination:

I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel;
So much is truth to me. What Is then? Since
One object, viewed diversely, may evince
Beauty and ugliness — this way attract,
That way repel, — why gloze upon the fact?
Why must a single of the sides be right?
Where’s abstract Right for me?

That is his final thought on politics, on the situation between the Guelf and the Ghibellines, Rome and the Emperor. Confronted with the complex political situation in Italy between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines Sordello says, “What, it comes to pass / That poesy, sooner than politics, / Makes fade young hair.” Browning writes, “the sudden swell / of his expanding soul showed Ill and Well, Sorrow and Joy, Beauty and Ugliness, Virtue and Vice, the Larger and the Less.” It is a transcendent moment for the poet. But suddenly Sordello, at the end of his life, finds himself alone, “quite out of Time and this world: all was known.” He has done all he could and in the end is able to express himself and exhibit his true worth to the people.

Browning concludes Sordello’s life with a series of metaphysical statements and questions: “A sphere is but a sphere; / Small, Great, are merely terms we bandy here; / Since to the spirit’s absoluteness all / are alike.” Though difference is perceivable in human terms, we are all alike from the perspective of the Absolute. He continues, “But does our knowledge reach / No farther? Is the cloud of hindrance broke / but by the failing of the fleshly yoke, / Its loves and hates, as now when death lets soar / Sordello, self-sufficient as before, / though during the mere space that shall elapse / ‘Twixt his enthrallment in new bonds perhaps?” Knowledge cannot go any further and halts before the idea of the Divine, or the afterlife. At that point questions cease to have answers. Life thus appears a “sorry farce.”

At a point of utter despair, dissatisfied with his poetry, and unable to realize his vision of a City of God in which the people were unified under Christianity, Sordello’s despair turns to bliss, the poem is suddenly realized, he is able to feel, and with that comes an outpouring of language. He is finally able to write an unselfconscious poetry, not indebted to what others expected of him, but that emerged from deep inside himself. His world of fantasy has shown itself a false paradise, and his entry into politics proves equally useless in being an outlet for his desires,
which finally erupted in the poem to create a new kind of poetry. The tragedy is that Sordello realized too late the errors of his ways. Browning’s *Sordello* is one of the most important and unique nineteenth-century epics about the evolution of a poet’s soul, his duty to himself, to others, and to his art. It remains relevant to this day and I feel it should be read by every poet serious about his art.

**Works Cited**