Sordello’s Pristine Pulpiness

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Book Two of Browning’s Sordello (1840) ends with a dazzling discard. The book has presented—and, at the same time, through verse-texture of a rich corrugation unmatched even in Browning’s own other works, has thoroughly obscured—the most elaborate imaginable account of the poetics of the poet-hero, Sordello, of his own self-interrogations on this score, and of the way in which he takes his poetics to contrast with those of the rival poet Eglamor, whom Sordello has so efficaciously worsted in poetic agon as actually to kill him. At the end of this rich and strange meditation, Sordello apparently renounces poetry, or at least the public practice of it in which he has been so notably and so instantaneously successful. The renunciation of actually being a poet, of making and performing verses, is linked, in Sordello’s mind, with the thought of a resumption of poetical, and perhaps even directly of political, power. In the very act of removing the poet’s “crown,” he remarks, apparently for his own benefit, “I shall be king again!” (ii.1001; L524).1

Although expected to officiate as poet at an important public event in Mantua next day, Sordello doffs the scarf set round him for a prize, and “into the font he threw/His crown.” (ii. 1002-3; L524). The poet simply fails to turn up.

Next day, no poet! Wherefore? asked
Taurello, when the dance of Jongleurs masked
As devils ended; don’t a song come next?
The master of the pageant looked perplexed
Till Naddo’s whisper came to his relief;
His Highness knew what poets were: in brief,
Had not the tetchy race prescriptive right
To peevishness, caprice? or, call it spite,
One must receive their nature in its length
And breadth, expect the weakness with the strength!
So phrasing, till, his stock of phrases spent,
The easy-natured soldier smiled assent,
Settled his portly person, smoothed his chin,
And nodded that the bull-chase might begin.

Sordello’s jettisoning of his crown and scarf is matched and trumped here by a throwaway of Browning’s own. The whole deeply worked poetics of verse which this Book has elaborated in verse is permitted, comically, to be effaced at once by Taurello’s light enquiry, whose note is authentically that of a hunting English country squire, circa 1839: “Don’t a song come next?” No poet? What a pity. Still, on with the bull-chase. The entire deep meditation set out in the rest of this Book on poetry’s possible efficacy, on its relationship to power, spiritual and political—on what might now be called poetry’s “criticality”—and on the relation of all these to verse composition itself, is deleted with a shrug.

The title of the book which you have in your hands—or, perhaps, some part of which, only, you have on your screen—seems to wish to make a distinction. The rhythm or rhythms in which it is to be interested are to be “critical.” The adjective seems to say that rhythm might often, or even ordinarily, be received or experienced as uncritical, or even as the opposite of critique; that the specific difference which is to be made by this intervention is to conceive ways in which rhythm might have a critical force, instead, perhaps, of a lulling or assuaging or ideological one. No individual title, naturally, consisting of a mere phrase as it usually must, and lacking the specifying syntax which might turn that phrase into a claim or proposition of any kind, can bear too much scrutiny of this kind. Yet a title’s freedom from syntax, its slogan-like or mythical excerptedness from such a context, can be at the same time just what makes it all the more necessary that it be interrogated. A title is just the blurred point at which various and even mutually antagonistic thoughts or practices of thinking and writing can be recruited together under a single banner, as mute and as insistent as a photograph of a young soldier.

“Critical rhythm”: the phrase, at first hearing, is oxymoronic. The family of terms associated with criticism and critique imply customarily that something will be tested and judged. In a historiography which
is fully “critical” rather than antiquarian, evidence will be subjected to an examination of its credentials, rather than taken on trust; in a “critical” edition the nature and authenticity of manuscripts, printed texts, and so on, will be assessed independently before they are allowed to provide readings for the edited text; or in a “critique” of pure reason, the instrument of knowing is to be subjected to an assessment of its nature and limits before it is allowed to be let loose and actually to know anything. How might “rhythm,” this eminently non-propositional quantity, be in any of these senses “critical”? Its force has very often been taken to imply the reverse, an anaesthetic or lulling appeasement of awkward questioning. The phrase “critical rhythm” implies that rhythm can, in certain circumstances, take on a para-propositional or a cognitive force: a force by which it would be able to show something, to unconceal something, or even to think something. It brings us, indeed, close to an ugly term from recent discussions in art history and the aesthetics of visual art, a term which those disciplines have nevertheless often found it hard to do without: “criticality.” The criticality of a work of art (a category which, of course, itself remains under critical interrogation or even erasure) would be that mysterious constellation of its features or operations by which its relation to the existing social order might be more than a purely ideological one; by which that work would exercise an implicit, but perhaps explicable, critique of the social order which has produced it and with which it remains necessarily complicit. In Adorno’s paradox, art is “society’s social antithesis.” “Criticality”—Adorno himself tended to prefer the bolder and more embarrassing term “truth-content”—would cover those aspects of the work of art which allow it to be understood as exercising a work of negation or interrogation upon that very society which is its own condition of possibility.

For Adorno, of course, it would be impossible to attribute this elusive critical force or truth-content to any single technical feature or set of features characterizing works of art. No aspect of a work of art’s technical handling bears truth-content in and of itself, but only as a moment in the entire complex constellation of forces and materials constituted by a singular work of art. There is no such thing as a “critical” harmonic repertoire, for example. Even free atonality is not critical in and of itself, nor is diatonic harmony automatically conservative. These technical arrays take on these forces only as they happen to be exploited and developed in particular musical compositions, either successfully or unsuccessfully.

In order to interrogate and develop this phrase, “critical rhythm,” a little further, I want to consider together two texts not often read in each other’s company: the poem already introduced, Robert Browning’s
Sordello—a poem which I take to be the among the most virtuosic displays in the field of extended verse-composition extant in English—and Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The connection between the two is not argued, here, to be one of Kant’s possible “influence” on Browning, even though the possibility of an indirect influence of the philosopher on the poet cannot be perfectly excluded, but rather that, in the aporetic core of Kant’s third critique, important structural features of the situation later faced by the poem *Sordello* are laid bare. The new verse planet discovered by *Sordello*, in the new repertoire of verse instrumentations, rhythms and sentences which it brings into being, is one on which there can be neither a science of the beautiful nor any “beautiful science,” but in which a new poetics of the ugly begins to emerge, a poetics in which meter, rhythm and rhyme are permitted to “corrugate” the verse surface so as to produce a complexity of verse texture well in excess of any possible mimetic or illustrative role for which it could be recuperated. The connection will be developed specifically, rather than generally, by investigating a passing moment in the *Critique of Judgment* in which Kant considers the question of versification itself. The consideration is evidence for a larger hypothesis which I have been examining elsewhere, that moments at which philosophers consider *verse* are very often more revealing than those in which they meditate upon *poetry*, because whereas the difficulty of defining “poetry” leaves it almost infinitely malleable to the philosopher’s own preoccupations and predilections, the constraint imposed by the idea of “verse” is instead specific enough to exert pressure upon the philosophical apparatus brought up to interpret it. The sense of “rhythm” which will be considered is necessarily restricted, time and space being so too: I shall concentrate on the sense which “rhythm” is usually given in metrics, as what results, in verse, precisely from the interaction between an arbitrary and abstract metrical pattern, a pattern which it is in principle impossible for any individual line of verse “perfectly” to realize, and the individual words, phrases, and sentences which are made to count as instances of that pattern in a verse composition. By insisting upon the absolute entanglement of “rhythm” in this sense in patterns of instrumentation, syntax, semantics, and verse-composition in general, I shall hope to mortify the assumption that there can in isolation be such a thing as a critical rhythm, that (for example) irregular rhythms might be more, or regular ones less, “critical.” But by specifying in part the verse physiognomy of Browning’s *Sordello* I shall offer some reasons for speculating that the poem’s critical work on the verse repertoires it inherits is in practice the vehicle by which it is able to allow verse to open up sealed aspects of historical experience.
The earliest reception of Sordello was almost unanimous—the exception was R. H. Horne’s scintillating piece in the Church of England Quarterly—in deploring its narrative obscurity and the harshness of its versification. More than one of Browning’s detractors pointed to a passage from near the beginning of Book Five as displaying convolutions egregious even from among Sordello’s flock of bizarreries:

Yet before they quite disband—a whim—
Study a shelter, now, for him, and him,
Nay, even him, to house them! any cave
Suffices—throw out earth. A loophole? Brave!
They ask to feel the sun shine, see the grass
Grow, hear the larks sing? Dead art thou, alas,
And I am dead! But here’s our son excels
At hurdle-weaving any Scythian, fells
Oak and devises rafters, dreams and shapes
That dream into a door-post, just escapes
The mystery of hinges. Lie we both
Perdue another age. The goodly growth
Of brick and stone! Our building-pelt was rough,
But that descendant’s garb suits well enough
A portico-contriver. Speed the years—
What’s time to us? and lo, a city rears
Itself! nay, enter—what’s the grave to us?
So our forlorn acquaintance carry thus
A head! successively sewer, forum, cirque—
Last age that aqueduct was counted work,
And now they tire the artificer upon
Blank alabaster, black obsidian,
Careful Jove’s face be duly fulgurant,
And mother Venus’ kiss-creased nipples pant
Back into pristine pulpiness, ere fixed
Above the baths.

(v.21-46; L656)

What?
Woolford and Karlin’s gloss for the longer passage of which this is part is, as usual, crisp and immensely helpful: “still using the architectural metaphor, Browning points out that Sordello’s error was to assume that social justice could be accomplished in a moment, whereas it must
inevitably be a gradual achievement, as the move from cave to city historically was.” [L656] If the passage, seen through this optic, immediately makes sense, what also becomes clear is the immense surplus of verse corrugation over any possible extent to which this texture might illustrate, amplify or exemplify this underlying idea. What might most perspicuously have been told as an indicative narrative in the past tense is instead orchestrated, in a way wholly characteristic of Browning, as a series of rhetorical questions, imperatives, and exclamations—or, for one of his detractors, “pitching, hysterical and broken sobs of sentences.” A mildly deranged routine of self-interrogation is at work (“A loophole? Brave!”). Verbs of the indicative mood are distinctly in the minority: the passage is dominated by imperatives, interrogatives, and subjunctives. One way of interpreting this sort of feature of Sordello’s verse manner, of course, has been to take it as a still unrecognized instinct for the dramatic monologue trying to get out. But these features of the passage’s verb-mood and rhetorical organization need to be understood in their relation to its phonotextual and prosodic instrumentation if their significance is to be heard accurately. Rhetoric almost always has significant rhythmic consequences, especially in verse. Here it sets up, briefly, a polymetrical passage in which two sets are running at the same time. “They ask to feel the sun shine, see the grass grow, hear the larks sing” is already, printed as prose, a striking instance of rhetorical parallelism, but, as relineation can make clear, it is also a miniature incantation in which an intonational contour is precisely reproduced three times:

feel the sun shine  
see the grass grow  
hear the larks sing

This is what Roger Fowler called a “metrical rhyme” within phrases: the same part of speech in each case falls at the corresponding part of the phrase and has an equivalent stress value: modal-verb the noun verb, modal-verb the noun verb, modal-verb the noun verb. But this very marked syntactic and rhythmic recurrence is also having at the same time to do duty within the ordinary five-beat couplets which form the metrical set for the poem as a whole:

They ask to feel the sun shine, see the grass  
Grow, hear the larks sing? Dead art thou, alas,

The violence of the line-break—always marked when it falls between the subject of a verb and that verb—is even more evident here because it cuts
into the three-phrase rhythmic recurrence with the metrical set which is deployed for the poem as a whole.

The passage comes to a climax with the astonishing line and a half on Venus, or rather on the sculptures of Venus which are the work of the refined artificers of the highest stage of city-construction; these are also the lines of the most intensely patterned phonemic linking and echoing in the passage:

And mother Venus’ kiss-creased nipples pant
Back into pristine pulpiness, ere fixed
Above the baths.

A good deal of what is singular in Sordello’s manner is compressed into these lines. The overloading of line 44 with stress (six, here) is a feature of many lines of the poem; equally typical is the way in which this is combined with a neologism formed by combination: “kiss-creased.” “Kiss-creased nipples” shunts three stresses together at the same time as it sets up congested echoes: “kiss” has its initial consonant repeated in “creased,” and its stressed vowel in “nipp-”; the medial plosive in “nipples” then spits all the way through the next line (“pant,” “Back,” “prist-,” “pulp-”), and, in general, this poem loves spitting, clicking, and coughing consonants, taking no care whatever to produce a liquidity or smoothness of texture, but, rather delighting in the reverse, in a foregrounding of the physical apparatus of speech production and its bodily mess. Then this needs to be taken together with the strange reversal in the sense. We well understand, especially after reading these comically luscious lines, with their curious mingling of “mother” Venus’ maternal and erotic aspects, how anyone might pant for Venus’ nipples, but what does it mean for the nipples themselves to “pant”? Or is it rather the artificer who “pants,” whether from lust for his own too plausible creation or from fatigue at the labors necessary to produce it—an exhalation so powerful as to restore Venus’ nipples to their former pristine pulpiness? “Pulpiness” suggests the frankest and crudest eroticism imaginable, wanting to get its hands on Venus’ breasts right away. Then “ere fixed / Above the baths” is a miniature metamorphosis. It mortifies any reader who might have become too transported with the living palpability of these nipples, of all this polymorphous panting and kissing. This is just a statue after all.

A. C. Swinburne, who seems to have known much of Sordello by heart, gets, in a long digression on Browning towards the beginning of his book on George Chapman, to the heart of what is distinctive about Sordello. Swinburne’s excuse for his digression is that he wants to show why Chapman really is often obscure in a pejorative sense, by showing why Brown-
ing is not. On the contrary, Swinburne suggests, Browning “is something too much the reverse of obscure; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realize with what spider-like sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro backward and forward as it lives along the animated line of its labour, springs from thread to thread and darts from centre to circumference of the glittering and quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception and kindled from the inexhaustible fires of his imagination. He never thinks but at full speed; and the rate of his thought is to that of another man’s as the speed of a railway to that of a waggon or the speed of a telegraph to that of a railway.” These sentences are about Browning in general; when Swinburne comes to discuss Sordello in particular, even he finds it necessary to qualify his admiration. The poem’s “manner of construction” does “not seem defensible” to him, he confesses. It “is like a structure in which the background runs into the foreground, the figures and the landscape confound each other for want of space and proportion, and there is no middle distance discernible at all.” Just such analogies from painting—the rebuke of a naïve failure of perspective—had earlier in the century been objected to Keats’ Endymion, the poem which, with real differences, is Sordello’s true verse ancestor, and whose links with Browning’s poem had already been recognized by Horne. Swinburne, though, goes on to make a still more fundamental point. The poem’s style, he writes, is “neither a dramatic nor a narrative style, neither personal nor impersonal, neither lyric nor historic, but at once too much of all these and not enough of any.”

Swinburne at last joins the long tradition of depreciating Sordello by comparison with Browning’s later securely achieved mode of dramatic monologue. “The best parts of this poem also belong in substance always and sometimes in form to the class of monodramas or soliloquies of the spirit; a form to which the analytic genius of Mr. Browning leads him ever as by instinct to return.” But there may be a danger of an evolutionary fallacy, reading Sordello from the retrospect of Browning’s later achievements in dramatic monologue, in insisting that effects of this power and complexity must merely have been immature specimens of a still misunderstood talent for dramatic monologue. The imperatives, apostrophes, subjunctives, and so on, which striate Browning’s conjectural history of an imaginary city given near the beginning of Book Five, need not be germs of drama, but might also be considered as marks of the poem’s continual collision of narrative and lyric modes. Sordello has proved hard to assimilate even for its academic apologists, I suggest, because it is so
difficult to subordinate its verse texture to a properly hermeneutic function. In the model still dominant, the texture of verse-composition is presumed, in order to earn its place in an analysis, to be in need of being shown to be in the service of some larger interpretative point. This procedural hierarchy often produces in its turn a misleading idea of how the composition of long poems itself works; it is often allowed to imply that everything remarkable about the poet’s verse technique is remarkable as offering a series of exemplifications and enactments of a prior set of hermeneutic designs upon the reader. This poem renders inoperable the privileging of hermeneutics over poetics. In Sordello we find waged as perhaps nowhere else in the long poem in English a continuous and unremitting war to the life between line and design. The plot is quite extraordinarily complex, but, as generations of Browning commentators have shown, and, especially, as the massive interpretative achievement of the Longman editors of this poem has demonstrated, it is not arbitrary or absent: it works, and it is worked out, for all its complexity, with remarkable care and consistency. It would be no mean thing to follow this plot, with its confusingly various nomenclature, sudden shifts of time and place, and so on, were it set out in prose; but the poem’s verse texture appears almost at all times to be taunting the reader by offering a competing series of traps for his or her attention, traps whose point is by no means to be in the service of or to clarify the plot, but rather, for all we can see, to distract readers from it, to make it impossible to keep their mind primarily on the “story.”

2

In the Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View Kant makes a distinction between two meanings of the term “poetry.” Poetica in sensu lato, that is, in a broad sense, “may include the arts of painting, horticulture and architecture, as well as the arts of composing music and verse.” The latter, verse-making, is what Kant calls poetica in sensu stricto. The only explicit mention of versification in the Critique of Judgment comes in section 43, “On art in general.” Kant is specifying the concept of art by running through a series of oppositions. Art is distinguished from nature as doing is from acting in general; it is distinguished from science as practical is distinguished from theoretical ability or technic from theory; it is distinguished from craft as free self-activity is distinguished from alienated labor. It is in the course of explaining this last opposition that Kant’s remarks about prosody are made. Having explained that free art
can only succeed if it is agreeable on its own account, Kant now makes an important qualification. Art must be free, but not so free that it becomes entirely disembodied:

> It is not inadvisable to recall that in all liberal arts there is nevertheless required something compulsory, or, as it is called, a mechanism, without which the spirit, which must be free in the art and which alone animates the work, would have no body at all and would entirely evaporate (e.g. in the art of poetry, correctness and richness of diction as well as prosody and meter), since many modern teachers believe that they can best promote a liberal art if they remove all compulsion from it and transform it from labor into mere play.¹⁵

This is both a difficult and a significant sentence, with numerous echoes in Kant’s wider authorship. First of all, it specifies the earlier suggestion that free art must be play. Free art must be “play, i.e., an occupation that is agreeable in itself.”¹⁶ But it must not be “mere play,” as it would were all constraint removed. The distinction is close to that which Kant makes in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he remarks that

> Those who reject his [Wolff’s] kind of teaching and simultaneously the procedure of the critique of pure reason can have nothing in mind except to throw off the fetters of science altogether, and to transform work into play, certainty into opinion, and philosophy into philodoxy.¹⁷

Any poet attempting free verse, this connection suggests, would be enacting a kind of poetical equivalent of skepticism, a versificatory philodoxy. Art, like science, must be work, even if—unlike science, which can never in any case be beautiful—it may not be undertaken for the sake of pay. Secondly, the sentence on prosody from section 43 of the *Critique of Judgment* raises the difficult question of the relation between art’s spirit and its body. This is a rare moment at which Kant takes advantage of that lexical connection between the philosophical and chemical senses of the term spirit which was so often exploited by eighteenth-century ironists—for example in Swift’s “Dissertation on the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit.” If there were no constraint or mechanism in art, Kant says, the spirit would have no body and would evaporate [verdunsten]. Meter and prosody, therefore, are figured here as a kind of reliquary. They contain something which is infinitely precious—for what could be more precious than a free spirit which animates something which, presumably, would
otherwise be dead?—and yet they must also constrain this precious, animating liquid, which would otherwise vanish into thin air.

Two different kinds of possibilities, then, seem to be envisaged for verse. It might be a mechanism, something itself inert and non-living, whose whole point is that it should in some way arbitrarily constrain the free spirit of art, and where what matters is not any property which the mechanism might have on its own account, but the mere fact that free spirit meets a constraint and is therefore obliged to turn play into work. Or it might be a body, something in which the free spirit of art finds an altogether appropriate embodiment or incarnation, an embodiment without which it could hardly in any case produce a work of poetry, rather than vague feelings of poetical inspired-ness, at all. The choice of the word “mechanism” seems deliberately to emphasize the inorganic, the arbitrary nature of the constraint; but the fear that, without this mechanism, spirit might lack a body, seems to do the very reverse.

We cannot but be aware of the contrast between the way in which Kant treats the question of arbitrary constraints in his critique of established religion, and the way in which he treats them in the case of art. In Part Four of Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, which bears the subtitle “Of Religion and Priestcraft,” Kant cuts through the complacency which thinks of verbally articulated prayer as somehow less superstitious than more visibly embodied religious practices:

Whether the devout individual makes his statutory visit at church or undertakes a pilgrimage to the sanctuaries in Loreto or Palestine; whether he takes his formulas of prayer to the heavenly authorities with his lips, or by means of a prayer-wheel, like the Tibetan (who believes that his wishes, even if set out in writing, will reach their end just as well, only provided that they be set in motion by some thing or another, by the wind, for instance, if written on flags, or by the hand, if enclosed in a canister as though in a slinging device), or whatever the surrogate for the moral service of God might be, it is all the same and of equal worth.¹⁸

Nothing visible or physical can ever stand in for the invisible. For Kant the lips which move in prayer might just as well be a prayer-wheel turned only by the wind. The lips can add nothing which the spirit has not already performed. But perhaps there is to be a moment, like that which we have just seen in the Critique of Judgment, in which the illusion of a pure and wholly unconstrained spirit will itself be turned upon and subjected to constraint? This possibility is in fact raised immediately afterwards, only to be decisively removed:
But is there not also perhaps a dizzying *delusion of virtue*, rising above the bounds of human capacity, and might it not well be reckoned together with groveling delusion of religion, in the general class of self-deceptions? No. The disposition of virtue has to do with something *actual*, which is in itself well-pleasing to God and conforms to what is best for the world. True, a delusionary sense of superiority may attach itself to it—the delusion of regarding oneself adequate to the idea of one’s holy duty. But this is only accidental.¹⁹

So, although there certainly are delusions that can attach to the disposition of virtue, these are “accidental.” The delusion which attaches to any attempt to provide an outer manifestation of an inner state, however, is essentially a surrogate for virtue, whose very character is made up of delusion. The contrast with the *Critique of Judgment* is striking. There is no danger that the moral service of God will “evaporate” without a tangible embodiment. On the contrary, such embodiments are precisely what imperils that service.

Now, from one point of view, this is not at all surprising. For Kant, this just is the difference between acting morally and making a poem. What are significant for us, however, are the consequences of Kant’s insistence on the radical nature of this separation. It means that, in the end, it makes no difference at all whether the scrap of contingency which is used to provide a constraint is an inert mechanism or a living body. Sing expressively or twiddle your thumbs: either is equally useless so far as rational religion is concerned. There can be no appropriate external form of worship because it is the very notion of an external form which is inappropriate. Conversely, in the case of prosody, there is no sense at all in Kant’s account that one or another exercise of free spirit might be better or worse domiciled in one or another meter. Indeed, a friction between the two seems to be the whole point. The constraint is there just for the purpose of making the poet do some work, and so to prevent poetic inspiration from going up in smoke.

Central to the development of twentieth-century metrics was the clarification and codification of the difference between meter and rhythm. This is understood in different ways in different traditions, of course, but, crudely put, meter is a wholly arbitrary pattern which can in fact never be perfectly realized by any individual line of verse. Rhythm, in such accounts, is created precisely by the inevitable *tension* between a metrical set and individual lines of verse in individual delivery instances. In this process of the separation of meter from rhythm Kant plays both an admitted role, and an even more important unadmitted one. Many of the chief
metricians, especially amongst the Russians, were directly influenced by early twentieth-century neo-Kantianism and by its aesthetics in particular. Zhirmunsky's *Theory of Verse* explicitly acknowledges its debt to Kant. But even where there is no explicit acknowledgement of Kant, the essential conceptual structure is one that I would suggest is hardly thinkable without Kant. Meter is continually described by metricians as a norm, yet one that can never be realized. Individual lines may be closer to or further away from this norm; they can never perfectly embody it, just because it is in the very nature of meter to be a more perfectly abstract pattern than we ever find in natural language. It is a “norm,” that is, of a highly factical kind: it contains no particular values or properties except that of being laid down and of resisting all attempts to approximate to it. It is highly questionable, in fact, whether the word “norm” is at all of any further use in describing meter, because by metricians it is treated in practice just as Kant here treats it: as a purely mechanical constraint, whose whole point lies in its being mechanical. The current standard theory of the relationship between rhythm and meter bears, in fact, a strong resemblance to the idea of the asymptotic progression of the moral agent towards the good—but one which lacks the idea of the good, lacks the idea of moral agency, and lacks the idea of progression. In this sense, the implication of Kant's sentence on verse-making, that meter is not itself a shape of spirit but instead a purely external and mechanical constraint upon it, has come to dominate the field.

Hence the temptation to think of verse “rhythm” as the “critical” element of verse. Against meter’s inhuman abstraction and constraint, rhythm would figure as the concrete, the living, the embodied, the organic, the spontaneous. Such a temptation is succumbed to whenever, as quite often happens, irregular or metrically defective lines are regarded, quasi-allegorically, as connoting or even as producing “subversion” or disturbance of some larger code of values or assumptions, a code which can then be implicitly identified with metrical regularity.

Kant’s extremely brief discussion of versification in the *Critique of Judgment* has, for all its strangeness, and for all that it shows no evidence of any real understanding of or interest in versification on Kant’s part, this merit: that it does not attempt to place meter in an organic or mimetic relationship to meaning. It regards meter as of a substance quite inorganically alien to the “spirit” of poetry, and takes this alienness to be meter’s virtue. One need not follow Kant in thinking of meter as a kind of container to take a hint, nonetheless, from his insistence on the *antagonistic* element in the relationship between meter and meaning.
For Kant, then, a persisting antagonism between spontaneity and constraint is what makes poetry poetry, rather than a mere vanishing effusion of high spirits. Much of the poetics of verse elaborated in book two of *Sordello* is concerned with precisely this clash. But Browning’s version of it is never as simple as the relation of the lid of a jar to the volatile spirits inside it. Browning’s sense of the mutual antagonism of spontaneity and constraint is dynamic, a continuous love-fight in which neither opponent can remain unscathed.

Sordello’s first brush with actual *poetica in strictu senso*, as opposed to that *sensu lato* which he has been cultivating just by being poetical and thinking deeply in and around Goito in book one, reads at first like a dream of spontaneous genius triumphant. Sordello has “wandered forth” to Mantua and happens to find the lady with whom he is in love, Palma, hearing with others a poetical performance by the “best Troubadour of Boniface,” Eglamor.

Has he ceased?
And lo, the people’s frank applause half done,
Sordello was beside him, had begun
(Spite of indignant twitchings from his friend
The Trouvere) the true lay with the true end,
Taking the other’s names and time and place
For his. On flew the song, a giddy race,
After the flying story; word made leap
Out word; rhyme—rhyme; the lay could barely keep
Pace with the action visibly rushing past:
Both ended. Back fell Naddo more aghast
Than your Egyptian from the harrassed bull
That wheels abrupt and, bellowing, fronts full
His plague, who spies a scarab ’neath his tongue,
And finds ’twas Apis’ flank his hasty prong
Insulted. But the people—but the cries,
And crowding round, and proffering the prize!
(For he had gained some prize)—He seemed to shrink
Into a sleepy cloud . . .

(ii. 78–96; L468)

All the elements of a juvenile fantasy of poetical success are present. Sordello’s act of performance is not premeditated, but appears to come over
him ("Sordello was beside him"). Despite the fact that this is his first outing, and, so far as we can tell, his first practical encounter with song and with verse in particular, rather than with the poetical in general, Sordello knows just what to do and how to do it. Acclaim is total, universal, and instantaneous. The people crowd round. The poetry connoisseur currently in possession of the field, Naddo, meanwhile, knows with horrified immediacy that he is in the presence of sacred inviolability (the “scarab”).

Last, Sordello wins a prize for which he did not even know that he was competing (“some prize”). And his response is to shrink into a sleepy cloud, fleeing from the possible imputation of ever having wished for prizes, acclaim, and so forth. Never in the poem does Sordello sound more like his dreamy ancestor, Keats’ Endymion, than in this cloudy retreat. The elements of mock which hover around the hero throughout Sordello, and which often make him sound like a Crispin avant la lettre C (compare “He pondered this”) are just held at bay.

Yet a counter-song is also at work here, one in which the little bits and pieces of verse-making are not the passive materials upon which spontaneous genius exerts itself, but are instead themselves motors of invention, what bears Sordello’s song up: “[W]ord made leap/Out word—rhyme, rhyme.” Sordello’s song does not in fact come out of thin air but as an act of what we could call rhapsody, in Gregory Nagy’s precise sense that the rhapsode is the one who is able to take up the song wherever another leaves it, and who strives to outdo as he takes up. Sordello takes Eglamor’s “names and time and place/For his.” The description of the performance does not depend upon the subordination of execution to invention, nor on a myth of their ineffable unity, but rather shows, in a barely intelligible way, each competing with the other. It is hard to know what it can mean to say that the song was struggling to catch up with the story, or that “the lay could barely keep/Pace with the action visibly rushing past,” since the action can only rush past insofar as the lay makes it do so, and the whole story is sung. What seems to be meant, rather, is the felt antagonism of two different kinds of attention or practice, their necessary discrepancy and mutual competition, figured here as a race.

The description of Sordello’s first success can hardly avoid taking on a metaprosodic force. It is likely immediately to remind us of aspects of Browning’s own verse manner in Sordello. An instance is the poet’s apostrophe to Dante, in which he explains that although we almost always think of Sordello in relation to Dante, he, the poet, wishes to detach Sordello from Dante and to consider him as he is in himself:
sordello’s pristine pulpiness / 75

(If I should falter now)—for he is Thine!
Sordello, thy forerunner, Florentine!
A herald-star I know thou didst absorb
Relentless into the consummate orb
That scared it from its right to roll along
A sempiternal path with dance and song
Fulfilling its allotted period
Serenest of the progeny of God
Who yet resigns it not; his darling stoops
With no quenched lights, desponds with no blank troops
Of disenfranchised brilliances, for, blent
Utterly with thee, its shy element
Like thine upburneth prosperous and clear:
Still, what if I approach the august sphere
Named now with only one name, disentwine
That under current soft and argentine
From its fierce mate in the majestic mass
Leavened as the sea whose fire was mixt with glass
In John's transcendent vision, launch once more
That lustre? Dante, pacer of the shore
Where glutted hell disgorgeth filthiest gloom,
Unbitten by its whirring sulphur-spume—
Or whence the grieved and obscure waters slope
Into a darkness quieted by hope—
Plucker of amaranths grown beneath God’s eye
In gracious twilights where his Chosen lie,
I would do this! If I should falter now—

(i. 347-73; L417-18)

The most immediately striking feature of this passage is the distended sentence beginning in its third line and continuing without any other punctuation than that of line end itself all the way through to the semicolon in the middle of line nine. Its syntax is compressed because, still more than is habitual with Browning, it omits many connectives which would ordinarily be present. This feeling of intense compression is compounded by the difficulty of parsing the sentence: “Relentless,” for example, seems to be an adjective qualifying “thou,” but, because it appears immediately after the verb “absorb” made prominent by line-end, we wonder briefly whether it might be an archaic adverb qualifying that verb; or, again, if it be an adjective, whether it might even qualify the “herald-star” and
not “thou” at all. Then there is the frequent impersonal pronoun “it,” which we need to keep referring back to the “herald-star,” even though it is closer to the “orb.” The level of paraphrase, meanwhile, continues almost immeasurably distant: faced with the difficulty of getting these lines out so as to make syntax and meter work at once, readers are hardly in a position to work out what is perfectly clear once the passage has been paraphrased, that “thou” is Dante and the herald-star Sordello, and that the poet is saying that Sordello has tended to be overshadowed, or, rather, over-illuminated, by Dante.

What accounts for this passage’s peculiar power, I think, is that a high degree of difficulty in construing the sentence, a degree of difficulty ubiquitous in Sordello, meshes or collides at this point with a melodic pattern at once rapid and incantatory. Consider lines 349–54:

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Re lent less in to the con sum mate orb
That scared it from its right to roll a long
A sem pi ter nal path with dance and song
Ful fill ing its all ott ed pe ri od
Se re nest of the pro ge ny of God
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From the third to the fifth syllables of these lines there is only one clear primary stress: on the “ter” of “sempiternal.” For most of this sequence, in other words, Browning omits to accent the fourth, a place which usually is accented in the English heroic line and, as can be seen from the rest of this long passage, is usually accented even in Browning’s heroic line. “Relentless into the consummate orb” begins this series with a line of startling rapidity—phenomenologically rapid, that is, in the experience of speed which the appearance of five weak syllables in a row induces, since there is no real evidence that such lines take less time to speak than lines full of stresses—and it then begins what we could think of as a kind of rhythmic rhyme, to adapt a term of the poetician Roger Fowler, running through the next four lines. Yet there is no hint at all of syntactic rhyme, that feature which Fowler so clearly illustrates from Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, in which rhythmic repetitions would be precisely matched by syntactic ones. Instead the part of speech which in each case occupies the repeated rhythmic formula is continually varied. So, virtuosically, are polysyllables and monosyllables. “Relentless into the consummate orb” draws part of its springiness from the two polysyllables, which provide a completely unambiguous pattern of accents to carry us across this line with only three of them. But two lines later, the poet is able to achieve the same effect with an almost entirely monosyllabic line: “That scared it from its right to roll along.”
If, so far, syntax has in a certain sense been subordinated to rhythm, made to fit itself as best it can into a tune, the verse now reverses that priority by offering us a place at which the role of syntax in specifying intonation is, precisely, foregrounded: at “for, blent / Utterly with thee” the pointed comma after “for” demands an accentuation which we might otherwise forgo in order to avoid the extreme irregularity of having both nine and ten but not eight stressed, and runs, in turn, into a rhythmic problem in the next line, where we should like, in order to make the best sense, to emphasize “thee” (since it is hardly clear what point there would be in emphasizing the fact that Sordello is blent with Dante rather than through him or into him or around him), yet making the line work as a metrical instance pushes us towards just that accentuation.

Swinburne, we remember, thought that it was the poem’s style which was “neither lyric nor historic.” It is at the level of the poem’s melodics, the intonational system of its verse syntax, that its generic collisions are most obtrusively present. The song-like melody of the earlier, barely punctuated, part of the passage accompanies the densest possible thicket of syntax and reference; the instructions issued by punctuation, later on, seem momentarily to make prose argument into the dominant factor. If it is the case that verse delivery is suspended between song and speech, then characteristic of Browning’s melodics is to make that delivery perform hairpin turns between one and the other, to perform with extreme abruptness those transitions which had, even so recently as Wordsworth’s comments on the versification of “Tintern Abbey,” been considered as more characteristic of the greater lyric, than of the narrative long poem.

How critical these qualities are to Sordello can be appreciated when we consider Browning’s revisions to the poem. They certainly fall far short of what he once envisaged, that process which in a letter of 1856 to the American publisher James T. Fields he referred to as “simply writing in the unwritten every-other-line which I stupidly left as an amusement for the reader to do—who, after all, is no writer, nor needs be” (L355). Browning abandoned this plan. Yet what he did do does have a powerful impact upon the poem’s melodics, because Browning punctuates much more heavily in his later texts. Even very slight alterations can have an important effect upon verse texture. Here is the 1888 text of the same passage:

(If I should falter now)—for he is thine!
Sordello, thy forerunner, Florentine!
A herald-star I know thou didst absorb
Relentless into the consummate orb
That scared it from its right to roll along
A sempiternal path with dance and song
Fulfilling its allotted period,
Serenest of the progeny of God—
Who yet resigns it not! His darling stoops
With no quenched lights, desponds with no blank troops
Of disenfranchised brilliancies, for, blent
Utterly with thee, its shy element
Like thine upburneth prosperous and clear.
Still, what if I approach the august sphere
Named now with only one name, disentwine
That under-current soft and argentine
From its fierce mate in the majestic mass
Leavened as the sea whose fire was mixt with glass
In John's transcendent vision,—launch once more
That lustre? Dante, pacer of the shore
Where glutted hell disgorgeth filthiest gloom,
Unbitten by its whirring sulphur-spume—
Or whence the grieved and obscure waters slope
Into a darkness quieted by hope;
Plucker of amaranths grown beneath God's eye
In gracious twilights where his chosen lie,—
I would do this! If I should falter now! \[22

The changes are apparently of the most minor, yet they make a very important difference to the melodics of the passage. 1840's five sentences have now become seven. At the middle of the passage, the colon after "clear" has been replaced with a full stop, thus breaking the passage's huge central sentence into two and offering a more marked resting place. The most significant change, however, is that to the end of the long incantatory series at the beginning of that sentence, from "A herald-star I know thou dost absorb" to "Who yet resigns it not." A comma now appears after "period" and a dash after "God." These little alterations represent a tiny failure of nerve in the poem's melodics. The achievement of sustaining in the air thus many lines without punctuation, held together by syntactic relation alone, has given way, now, in the last few lines, to a looser or paratactic connection, in which, therefore, "Serenest of the progeny of God" is now merely an addition to the list of Sordello's properties instead of precisely that manner in which Sordello is to be understood as "Fulfilling his allotted period."

Although many of Browning's revisions concern what might once have been thought of as "accidentals," therefore, they in fact completely alter
the substance of the poem by transforming its melodics. They do this along just the axis intuited by Swinburne—that of genre or mode, but mode sounding in the smallest details of intonation.

4

If we decline, then, to follow the consensus in understanding the undecidability of Sordello’s mode as a symptom of a poet with a genius for dramatic monologue struggling to get out, and instead regard it as the vital element from which a masterpiece of “corrugation” is precipitated, we may begin to think of the strange relationship between line and design in this poem as one of its central achievements. It is convenient to think of the relationship of individual lines to the poem of which they are made up as a relationship of parts to whole, bricks to a building. Yet this convenience also misleads, because metrical constraint (and, where it pertains, the constraint of rhyme too) are compositional factors. Under these constraints, word makes leap out word, rhyme rhyme. They inevitably induce phrases, ideas and even arguments or narratives which might not have been envisaged in just this shape in any work of plotting or designing undertaken by the poet before composition. Therefore the poem is a force field of antagonisms between modes of thinking constrained by very different requirements, modes which are not necessarily guaranteed to be in a harmonious or stable relationship with each other. The unity a poem has is as much like the unity of a war or a boxing match as it is like that of a building. Some practices of verse composition seem to allow the line (which, after all, is also at its level a whole with parts) to claim its own value as a composition in itself. In such poems, it feels untrue to say that each line has its value only subordinately, in relation to the whole. It seems to be just as much the case that elements of “the whole”—itself, of course, unable to avoid being a moment of synoptic abstraction—are in the service of these “parts,” these thousands of works of art all squaring up to each other in the poem’s arena.

Although Browning’s interest in Shelley is much more fully attested than that in Keats, and although Browning’s earlier poetry had been in various ways clearly derivative of Shelley’s, it is quite clear that at the decisive level, the compositional level of verse syntax, Endymion’s is the crucial presence. Browning’s further advance or further decline on Keats, however, is clear. Browning’s syntax is at once much more complex and more propulsive than Keats’, so that we are driven on through these couplets with a force which in English verse is paralleled only, perhaps, in Milton. Matthew Campbell described the poem as “the most exhaustive,
and exhausting, early Victorian attempt to sound a rhythm of will,” an
idea which certainly captures our sense that this is verse which leaves no
muscle unstrained.23 The invitation to delicious diligent indolence which
is held out by Keats’ labyrinthine verse sentences is thus replaced in
Browning by something much less inviting; as Herbert Tucker comments,
“despite the poem’s reputation for bewilderment, it is harder in this feel-
good sense to get lost in Sordello” than in any other poem Tucker’s book
discusses.24 Sordello, in fact, is the poem in which Keats’ “undersong of
disrespect to the public” becomes something like an oversong, a descant.
Ugliness is allowed into the texture of the verse itself, and this, perhaps,
explains the paradox that Browning’s descriptions of perfectly obscure
episodes in the wars of the Guelfs with the Ghibellines produce a verse
mode more alert to the repulsive contingencies of war, and more able to
keep them in view, than any other one can think of in English in the first
half of the nineteenth century:

So! but the midnight whisper turns a shout,
Eyes wink, mouths open, pulses circulate
In the stone walls: the past, the world you hate
Is with you, ambush, open field—or see
The surging flame—they fire Vicenza—glee!
Follow, let Pilio and Bernardi chafe—
Bring up the Mantuans—through San Biagio—safe!
Ah, the mad people waken? Ah, they writhe
And reach you? if they block the gate—no tithe
Can pass—keep back you Bassanese! the edge,
Use the edge—shear, thrust, hew, melt down the wedge,
Let out the black of those black upturned eyes!
Hell—are they sprinkling fire too? the blood fries
And hisses on your brass gloves as they tear
Those upturned faces choking with despair.25

Browning’s ability to produce a detail as peculiar and yet as compelling
as blood frying on hot brass gloves in the act of smashing up a face is
made possible, curiously, not by any determined effort at reportage, but,
rather, by the advanced involutions of his verse melodics and by the acute
indirectness of the narrative approach which those involutions compel.
This passage—Swinburne’s favorite—is part of the interior reflection of
the professional soldier Taurello Salinguerra. It is from a passage in which
Taurello is mentally addressing the Ghibellin lord with whom he has long
campaigned, Ecelin Romano. Ecelin has retired to a monastery, and Tau-
rello is sceptically wondering whether it will really, in his pious retreat,
in the event be possible for Ecelin quite to shut out every memory of what he has done and known in war. All the most unpleasant and disenchanted events in the poem—all the events in the poem as such, one is tempted to say—are introduced in this way in the course of someone's thinking about or remembering or alluding to something else, but just this seems to be the condition of their power. What is powerful here is not some attempt bracingly to break into the reader's cozy home with the real graphic horror, but, rather, the imagination of the point where fantasy runs out—Browning imagining Taurello imagining one little chink in Ecelin Romano's ability to imagine away what he has actually been. Leavis once complained of Browning's "corrugated surface," implying that the roughness was superficial; but, in Sordello, this is a surface which goes all the way down.

In a famous report of a conversation between Shelley and Byron, Shelley is supposed to have advanced the theory that each line of verse might be in itself an individual work of art. It is easy to paraphrase away this idea, by saying to ourselves that, for example, Shelley might have meant only that each line is crafted with a great deal of care and attention; if one takes the idea literally, however, it captures a necessary antagonism at the heart of every long poem, the antagonism between line and design. Here are a few instances that seize on memory and return to the mind in the street or the committee meeting: "Of infinite and absent Tyrolese," "Crowned with what sanguine-heart pomegranate blooms," "Though no affirmative disturbs the head," "By their selected evidence of song," "From the wet heap of rubbish where they burned," "Of the huge brain-mask welded ply o'er ply," "Bloom-flinders and fruit-sparkles and leaf-dust," "Tufting the Tyrrhene whelk's pearl-sheeted lip," "Amass the scintillations for one star," "When just the substituting osier lithe," "Eyepits to ear one gangrene since he plied," "Clove dizzily the solid of the war," "And hisses on your brass gloves as they tear" and, in the passage with which I began, "Relentless into the consummate orb." No responsible reader of the poem would read like this, of course: these lines not only cannot be interpreted without restoring their contexts to them, but their expressive force, too, depends upon that local web of patternings and interruptions in which they are caught. But the difficulty is that no reader of Sordello would want to or even can be a responsible reader unless she has first been an irresponsible reader, unless she has first given in to the most various series of seductions and repulsions which lines of these kinds seem to hold out like individual works of art. In Sordello it is sometimes as though the entire ensemble had been articulated so as to throw up lines so immensely striking, so ugly, even, that they captivate our attention, making it impossible
to keep our mind on the larger design which our superego keeps insisting shall be the kernel beneath that shell. It is as though the lines were to refuse to be mere constituent parts of this edifice of lines, and the swell and surge of Browning's carry-on were instead to exist precisely for the sake of these peculiar configurations of foam, these fugitive works of art. This is why it is, I think, that so many of the lines concerned are lines in which there is no punctuation of any kind. Their effect is quite different from that of the unpunctuated lines of standard mid-twentieth-century free verse, say, because they are wrested from sentences which do indeed aspire to work as parsable syntactical concatenations; yet what is thus wrested is something which wants not only to do its syntactical day-job, but also to break out in song or screeching.

Kant's aporetic account of judging the beautiful in the third critique—an account in which there is no science of the beautiful, and yet in which it is not satisfactory, either, to say that one does not know anything about the beautiful but one knows what one likes—is matched, as is less often noted, by an aporetic account of making the beautiful. Just as there is no science of the beautiful, there is no fine science either. Yet art must not be allowed to be sheer play. Poetry requires a verse constraint if it is not to be the literary equivalent of skeptical philodoxy. *Sordello*, in throwing up its myriad verse-crustaceans, strange and pocked and beautiful or ugly, seizes this aporia for itself at the level of technical production. It understands that only one part of a poem's work on history can be done by research, even by research so elaborate as that which the poet undertook in preparation for this poem. A poem's most powerful relationship to history lies in those supposedly purely technical but in fact intimately historical materials, the verse sentences, manners, repertoires, and formulae it inherits and on which it works by changing them. The poet as critic of an outworn word or melody or rhyme is at one and the same time the poet as critic of the historical experience which those verse materials cannot but have sedimented within them. Browning's *Sordello* is five thousand, eight hundred and ninety-six works of art in which a new poetics of verse becomes audible. It is a poetics still far in advance of any of the machinery which has so far been brought up to contain it, and whose consequences for current verse thinking have, perhaps, still fully to be unfolded.

Notes

2. The term is ubiquitous in, for example, the volume of James Elkins’ "Art Seminar" devoted to Art History Versus Aesthetics (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).


9. For more on Browning and impeded speech, see now Ewan Jones, “‘Let the rank tongue blossom’: Browning’s Stuttering,” Victorian Poetry 53, no. 2 (2015): 103–32.


11. Ibid., 16–17.

12. Ibid., 28.

13. Ibid.


16. Ibid.


19. Ibid., 168–69.


