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Sordello and the Reviewers

Taking pains

From 1834 until 1838 Browning repeatedly wrote to friends that the poem was nearly done: ‘You will see Sordello in a trice, if the fagging-fit holds’ he told Fanny Haworth, two years before publication. The preface to Paracelsus (1835) had promised that the next poem would emerge in ‘a more popular, and perhaps less difficult form’. Fifteen years after publication Browning still hoped that Sordello’s difficulty for readers could be got over by more hard work from him. The poem was ‘my best performance hitherto: I am not without evidence that the good of it is to be got at even now by the pains-taking, – and I hope & believe that, by myself taking proper pains in turn, – I shall make the good obtainable at a much easier rate’. The promised major revisions did not happen but this chapter will explore Browning’s association of the poem with pain that is not incidental but ‘proper’ to a poet’s work. Sordello is set in Lombardy in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Sordello grows up in seclusion at Goito, bereaved and disinherited, in a state violently at war with itself, Guelfs versus Ghibellins. He turns to poetry as a form of self-expression and happens to hear the bard Eglamor perform at a ‘Court of Love’. Sordello delivers an inspired improvisation which gets him the job of minstrel to the lady Palma at Mantua. He suffers pain from poetry where he expected pleasure: his audience disregards his wish to reveal himself through his work. He spends a year in retirement at Goito and then Palma declares her love for him and her plan that he become the leader of the Ghibellin party in Lombardy. They go to Ferrara, where the horrors of a siege shock Sordello. He resolves to help the people, and realizes that he cannot provide any quick
political solutions. He tries to persuade the Ghibellin leader, Taurello Salinguerra, to go over to the more progressive Guelfs. It is revealed that Sordello is in fact Taurello’s son and Taurello offers him the leadership of the Ghibellins, but this would mean betrayal of the Multitude. Sordello dies trying to decide how best to exercise his responsibility towards them. Why so much pain in these ‘incidents in the development of a soul’ (Longman I, p. 353n.)?

Early critical responses to Sordello were not interested in taking pains. But they are vexed by the poem’s unintelligibility, to which they refer in metaphors of baffled sensory perception and physical incoherence. The Athenaeum complains of: ‘the impenetrable veil, both of manner and language, in which [Browning] has contrived to wrap up whatever truths or beauties this volume, may contain’ and advises that if Browning’s Muse ‘would be appreciated by understandings of this earth, she must keep somewhere or other on this side of the clouds’.³ The Monthly Chronicle’s hopes are dashed: ‘We opened “Sordello” . . . with the most pleasurable anticipations, and closed it with the most painful disappointment, after reading patiently through the six books, still hoping – still deceived.’⁴ The reviewer finds the poem ‘dull to sleepiness’ and speculates ‘Mr Browning seems to have forgotten that the medium of art must ever be the beautiful; he seems to be totally indifferent to pleasing our imaginations and fancy by the music of verse and thoughts, by the grace of his diction as well as his imagery’. He finds ‘a positive want of dramatic or speculative interest in the story, and a by no means new or newly put moral’. One review in particular is interesting for its literal approach: it was also the most hostile. The Spectator says:

Whatever may be the poetical spirit of Mr. Browning, it is so overlaid in Sordello by digression, affectation, obscurity, and all the faults that spring, it would seem, from crudity of plan and a self-opinion which will neither cull thoughts nor revise composition, that the reader – at least a reader of our stamp – turns away.⁵

Rather than agree or disagree with these responses, we might ask to what in the poem they are responding.

All but two 1840 reviews of Sordello lament its flawed narrative and careless composition. The majority of early critics expected Browning to make the poem’s mixture of psychological development and historical drama appear more clearly to the reader. One reviewer took a different approach and tried to imagine how the reading mind should