

Robert Browning, « One Word more » (1855)

XII

I shall never, in the years remaining,
Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues.
Make you music that should all-express me;
So it seems; I stand on my attainment.
This of verse alone, one life allows me;
Verse and nothing else have I to give you;
Other heights in other lives, God willing;
All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love.

XIII

Yet a semblance of resource avails us—
Shade so finely touched, love's sense must seize it.
Take these lines, look lovingly and nearly,
Lines I write the first time and the last time.
He who works in fresco steals a hair-brush,
Curbs the liberal hand, subservient proudly,
Cramps his spirit, crowds its all in little,
Makes a strange art of an art familiar,
Fills his lady's missal-marge with flowerets,
He who blows through bronze may breathe through silver,
Fifty serenade a slumbrous princess.
He who writes, may write for once as I do.

XIV

Love, you saw me gather men and women,
Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
Enter each and all, and use their service,
Speak from every mouth,—the speech, a poem.
Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,
Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving:
I am mine and yours—the rest be all men's,
Karshish, Cleon, Norbert, and the fifty.
Let me speak this once in my true person,
Not as Lippo, Roland, or Andrea,
Though the fruit of speech be just this sentence:
Pray you, look on these my men and women,
Take and keep my fifty poems finished;
Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also!
Poor the speech; be how I speak, for all things.

“If there is any great quality more perceptible than another in Mr. Browning's intellect, it is his decisive and incisive faculty of thought, his sureness and intensity of perception, his rapid and trenchant resolution of aim. To charge him with obscurity is about as accurate as to call Lynceus purblind, or complain of the sluggish action of the telegraphic wire. He 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 realise with what spider—like swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and 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 fire 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."

Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1875

Unsigned notice, *The Literary Gazette*, 23 March 1833, p. 183

Somewhat mystical, somewhat poetical, somewhat sensual, and not a little unintelligible,—this is a dreamy volume, without an object, and unfit for publication.

Unsigned notice, *The Athenæum*, 2 August 1835, p. 640

There is talent in this dramatic poem, (in which is attempted a picture of the mind of this celebrated character,) but it is dreamy and obscure. Writers would do well to remember (by way of example,) that though it is not difficult to imitate the mysticism and vagueness of Shelley, we love him and have taken him to our hearts as a poet, not because of these characteristics—but in spite of them.

Unsigned review, *The Spectator*, 14 March 1840, xiii. 257

What this poem may be in its extent we are unable to say, for we cannot read it. 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.

From an unsigned review, *The Monthly Chronicle*, May 1840, v. 476–8

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 imagination and fancy by the music of verse and of thought, by the grace of his diction as well as of his imagery; and when this want of a sweet flowing beauty both in thought and versification...is coupled with a positive want of dramatic or speculative interest in the story, and a by no means new or newly put moral, we may be pardoned if we regard *Sordello* as a failure in toto.

Unsigned review, *The New Monthly*, 1840, xii. 214

Sordello, by Robert Browning.—If Mr. Browning will write, we wish he would write something comprehensible. *Sordello* is full of hard names, and nonsense. He calls it poetry, we term it trash of the very worst description.