Dramatic Form and Embodiment: Robert Browning and the Epistemology of Romantic Drama

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DRAMATIC FORM AND EMBODIMENT: ROBERT BROWNING AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF ROMANTIC DRAMA

by

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Abstract

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by

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Advisor: Felicia Bonaparte

Browning’s famous distinction between the subjective and the objective poet, Shelley and Shakespeare, as well as his own abandonment of the lyric in favour of dramatic poetry, has been commonly interpreted as an epistemological demarcation that separates Browning, as a Victorian poet, from his Romantic predecessors. Defining Shelley as the subjective poet who looks through the individual soul toward “not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato” (283), and Shakespeare as the objective poet who looks, not to his own soul, but upon the material world, choosing “to produce things external” and to “deal with the doings of men” (284), Browning delineates the work of Shelley as the poetry of idealism and the dramatic work of Shakespeare as the poetry of realism; therefore, as idealism and realism are commonly viewed as diametric opposites, Browning’s concept of objectivity has been seen as antithetical to the philosophical idealism of the subjective poet.

Although the recent critical consensus has been that Browning rejects idealism, this study will argue that it is actually in idealism, where the ideal is seen to embody itself in the material forms of empirical reality, that Browning develops his poetics of objective realism. I look at the influence of German idealism on Browning’s objective poetics and how he utilizes the famous distinction made by August and Friedrich Schlegel between classical and romantic epistemology to explore the origins of Christian, romantic art and to trace its modern correlative in
philosophical idealism. In doing this Browning presents his own dramatic poetry as
the next objective stage in the historical development of romantic idealism. I focus on
Browning’s neglected early verse dramas, because it is my contention that
Browning’s theory of dramatic form and its culmination in the dramatic monologue
cannot be considered in isolation from his plays. Indeed, these verse dramas are not
only key to understanding Browning’s development of the monologue form, but also
to the very epistemological grounds of his objective poetics.
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**Chapter 1:**

**Introduction**

Browning’s famous distinction between the subjective and the objective poet, Shelley and Shakespeare, as well as his own abandonment of the lyric in favour of dramatic poetry, has been commonly interpreted as an epistemological demarcation that separates Browning, as a Victorian poet, from his Romantic predecessors. Defining Shelley as the subjective poet who looks through the individual soul toward “not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato” (283), and Shakespeare as the objective poet who looks, not to his own soul, but upon the material world, choosing “to produce things external” and to “deal with the doings of men” (284), Browning delineates the work of Shelley as the poetry of idealism and the dramatic work of Shakespeare as the poetry of realism; therefore, as idealism and realism are commonly viewed as diametric opposites, Browning’s concept of objectivity has been seen as antithetical to the philosophical idealism of the subjective poet.

Although the recent critical consensus has been that Browning rejects idealism, this study will argue that it is actually in idealism, where the ideal is seen to embody itself in the material forms of empirical reality, that Browning develops his poetics of objective realism. I will look at the influence of German idealism on Browning’s objective poetics and how he utilizes the famous distinction made by August and Friedrich Schlegel between classical and romantic epistemology in both *Sordello* and *Men and Women* to explore the origins of Christian, romantic art and to trace its modern correlative in philosophical idealism. In doing this Browning presents his own dramatic poetry as the next objective stage in the historical development of romantic idealism. I will show how the idea of embodiment, which is
central to idealism, is the conceptual basis for Browning’s own development of objectivity and its representation in dramatic poetry. I pay particular attention to Browning’s neglected early verse dramas, because it is my contention that Browning’s formulation of dramatic form and its culmination in the dramatic monologue cannot be considered in isolation from his plays. Indeed the central premise of this study is that Browning’s verse dramas are central not only to our understanding of the monologue form, but to the very epistemological grounds of his poetic development.

Felicia Bonaparte argues that there has not been a sufficient emphasis on the influence of German philosophy and German Romantic literary theory, particularly of the Schlegel brothers, upon the Victorian period, and she cites the many English translations of their works that were published and re-published throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed very little has been written on the crucial link between Browning and German Romanticism. In her work on Browning and German Romantic irony, Patricia Dianne Rigg concedes that one of the main difficulties facing a critic when pursuing the similarities between Browning's poetics and the ideas of German Romanticism is his denial that he knew German philosophy, citing Browning's well known letter to Frederick Furnivall wherein he states that “I have never read a line, original or translated, by Kant, Schelling, or Hegel in my whole life” (25). Mrs. Orr raises a similar objection when she argues that, even though there is a clear affinity between Browning and German idealism in the metaphysics of Sordello, the fact that Browning asserts that he was not conversant with German philosophy surely poses an obstacle to any further line of inquiry: “it is difficult to realize their absence, then and always, from Mr. Browning's mind. But he was emphatic in his assurance that he knew neither the German philosophers nor their
reflection in Coleridge, who would have seemed a likely medium between them and
him” (108). Mrs. Orr's hesitation explains why critics have perhaps been wary of
positing a direct connection between Browning and German idealism; however, I
would like to suggest that it was not through the philosophy of Kant, Schelling and
Hegel, nor through Coleridge's interpretation of them, that Browning was exposed to
German Romantic ideas but instead through the popular translations of Friedrich and
August Schlegel.

As Bonaparte has demonstrated, it was the Schlegel brothers who were to have
a lasting impact on the nineteenth century. Bonaparte explains that the Schlegel
brothers were among the first, even before the nineteenth century had officially
begun, to recognize the crisis of faith that removed the deity as an epistemological
basis on which everything else could rest, foreseeing that empiricism, the philosophy
that seemed to be replacing religion, could only lead to conclusions never more than
subjective and relative, even in science when its grounds were understood, and so to
the absolute skepticism that held reality to be, as Leslie Stephen recognized long
before Nietzsche made the point, ultimately only a “fiction.” The German Romantics,
Bonaparte argues, set out to find a new epistemological basis in a philosophic
theory—a word they used in the etymological sense in which Ruskin uses it too, of a
perspective on the world—grounded in imagination. Bonaparte explains that for the
German Romantics imagination was not the “decaying sense” of Hobbes, who had
defined it for the empiricists, but a faculty that resembled the Platonic idea of noesis,
the power that could apprehend ideas, the noumena Kant had held inaccessible, the
inner truth of the physical world as well as the truth of the world beyond it, or what
had once been called metaphysical. As the Romantics saw the material world as a
hieroglyph indicating a deeper meaning, art itself was a symbol that revealed this
relationship between the ideal and the real. Thus the characteristic art of the century was what Bulwer-Lytton called, writing of fiction but including all other arts, the novel of “the double plot” in which character and plot tell the story of the real but in which has been embodied a “symbolic signification” (*The Poetics of Poesis*).

John Maynard notes in *Browning's Youth* that the young poet would have undoubtedly been exposed to the ideas of German Romanticism when he studied under Professor Ludwig von Muhlenfels at The University of London, and although it is true that Browning was to later state that he was not conversant with Hegel and Schelling—although he mentions the latter along with Fichte in “Bishop Blougram’s Apology”—he shows his familiarity with the Jena group when he writes in his early letters to Euphrasia Fanny Haworth and Alfred Domett that he has been learning to read German through a study of Tieck and Schlegel's translations of Shakespeare. Browning would have engaged with the early German Romantic movement under the aegis of his close friend, Thomas Carlyle, who was a passionate proponent and disseminator of German Romantic ideas, and also through his relationship with Elizabeth Barrett, who was an avid reader of German Romantic criticism. We know for a fact that a copy of August Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* was indeed upon the Brownings' bookshelf because Elizabeth Barrett praised it highly and used it to re-conceive her translation of *Prometheus*, as Clara Drummond has shown. Also William Macready wrote in his diary on January 4th 1840 that, at a dinner with Browning and Helen Faucit, Macready gave a copy of August Schlegel's *Lectures* and Madame de Stael’s *On Germany* to Helen Faucit, which suggests that they were a topic of their intimate conversation. Mary Ellis Gibson notes that Browning would also have been familiar with the critical vocabulary of the Schlegels, Schiller and Goethe as it was reproduced in the works of Henry Crabbe Robinson,
John Gibson Lockhart, Thomas De Quincey, Carlyle and Coleridge, among many others, especially in the essays that were published by W. J. Fox in the Monthly Repository in 1833.

It is not only the documented popularity of the Schlegels in England, and Browning's undoubted exposure to their work, that accounts for the influence of idealism on the development of his dramatic theory. Mrs. Orr's comment that Browning did not even know of German philosophy through Coleridge, “who would have seemed a likely medium between them and him,” points to another reason why Browning's connection to the Germans might have been missed. Bonaparte argues that while the critical consensus has always been that Coleridge was the voice of German Romanticism in England, it was actually Percy Shelley who the Victorians saw as the embodiment of German Romantic ideas. Bonaparte explains that the crucial distinction between Coleridge and Shelley lies in their conception of the imagination as an epistemological faculty: whereas for Coleridge the imagination is only a mediating force that enables the truths of the Reason to be embodied symbolically in the sensory images that belong to the material realm, for Shelley it is the primary faculty that apprehends the Platonic truths within and beyond the material world. Thus Bonaparte says, “it was not Coleridge in fact but Shelley the nineteenth century considered the apostle of this faculty, so much so that, despite their differences, it is tempting to think of him as the English Friedrich Schlegel. Of all the English, it is he who most completely represents the concept of the imagination as the German Romantic conceived it.” Bonaparte observes that “it was in their Platonism that Shelley and the Germans most fruitfully met,” and similarly Maynard notes that, as “the enthusiast for Shelley and Plato,” Browning “could hardly have withheld his approval” for German Romantic ideas (275).
Although German Romanticism was a collective movement, it of course incorporated diverse figures across a range of disciplines including the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ludwig Tieck and Novalis. Ernst Behler notes that the philosophers Fichte and Schelling were more loosely connected with this group but that it was their philosophy of idealism that became the ideological basis for the Romantics (4). For the purposes of this study I turn to the lectures of the Schlegel bothers, particularly to Friedrich Schlegel’s *Course of Lectures on the History of Literature*, translated into English and published in 1818, August Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, translated into English and published in 1815, which were both republished throughout the century, because they most directly inform Browning’s poetics. Although the Schlegel brothers are certainly not synonymous, I refer to them in this study through their shared concept of the romantic paradigm and its relation to philosophy and art, which is the foundation for their literary criticism. Indeed, it was the Schlegelian epistemological interpretation of the distinction between classical and romantic ontology that exerted the strongest impact on the British Romantics, as both Behler and Rene Welleck observe; and it was Coleridge in particular, along with Madame de Stael, who translated these ideas for a British audience. De Stael, who was August Schlegel's partner, helped bring his ideas to the rest of Europe through her book *On Germany*, which was read in French and translated into English, a copy of which was given by de Stael personally to Byron. Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Hazlitt and many other Romantic figures read Schlegel’s *Lectures* and it remained extremely popular with the Victorians, including the Brownings, and although many of the writers whom I discuss declare their debt to August Schlegel, his *Lectures* were so well-known in nineteenth-century Britain that it is clear that he often provides the foundational ideas for dramatic treatises that do
not refer to him specifically by name.

An instance of the Schlegels’ influence can be seen in Browning’s declaration to André Victor Amédée de Ripert-Monclar that German language and literature did not appeal to him in the same way that the Spanish tradition did: “Since I last saw you—(last alas)—I have learned Spanish enough [to] be able to read “the majestic Tongue which Calderon along the desert flung!” I am more & more possessed by a perfect antipathy for the North & its sights & sounds—which is strange truly, but real—I will not learn German for instance—and can’t help learning Spanish!” (3, 107-114). This actually testifies to the influence of German criticism since it was August Schlegel’s translations of Calderon, and his definition of the playwright's work as the highest example of romantic poetry in Spain—just as Shakespeare was the pinnacle of romantic poetry in England—which brought him to prominence for Romantic writers such as Shelley and then Browning after him.

The Schlegelian definition of romantic, an example of which they see in Calderon, is not capitalized and must be distinguished from the term “Romantic,” which later came to denote the broader European artistic and philosophical movement. Rather for the Schlegels, the designation of romantic in the lower case refers to the historical and epistemological transition from classical objectivity to Christian interiority. They argue that while in the classical age soul is perfectly embodied in the temporal world, this synthesis of the inward and outward, the ideal and real, is sundered in Christianity where the soul turns inward to contemplate its own transcendence and the existence of a higher power. The Schlegels explain that this romantic spirit emerged through the conversion of the Northern Teutonic tribes to Christianity and the subsequent fusion of heroism into the sentiments of Christianity, whereby external action was now based upon the perception of inward soul. Thus for
the Schlegels it was the poetry of the medieval troubadours that first signified this transition.

In his *Dialogue on Poetry*, which Behler notes is Friedrich Schlegel’s *Course of Lectures on the History of Literature* in its embryonic form, Schlegel sees the culmination of this romantic spirit in the subjective predicament of the modern poet and in the movement of idealism, which recognizes the transcendent subjective foundation of human existence. Yet he argues that this subjectivity finds its dialectical opposite in objectivity, which is the next stage of idealism that sees the objective world as the embodiment of the ideal. Friedrich sees this transition in the movement from Fichte’s subjective idealism to Schelling’s symbolic view of nature, which sees the spiritual not only in the individual mind but also in its objective manifestation. He emphasizes that as the objective is still informed by an ideal foundation, this next stage of idealism will lead to an “infinite realism” in art and a renewed relationship between the ideal and the real. However, both Friedrich and August assert that although this new realism will return to the objectivity of classical age, it will never be a perfect embodiment of soul but only ever an imperfect approximation; this establishes the distinction between classical and romantic symbolism that is critical for Browning’s poetics and to which I will return shortly.

In chapter two, I discuss how Browning traces the development of his poetics within the symbolic framework of the Schlegelian distinction between the classical and the romantic in order to present himself as a poet who is part of the historical development of romantic poetry. As a medieval troubadour, Sordello’s symbolic significance lies in that he is on the cusp of the new romantic paradigm. Indeed, the dense philosophical abstractions of *Sordello* are more clearly explicated when they are seen in their connection to the Schlegel brothers’ symbolic view of history as
Browning follows Sordello’s soul in its transition from the classical totality of Eglamor, turning inward to the transcendent subjectivity of soul, which in turn seeks its dialectical opposite in a new embodiment in the actions of the world. I will show how Browning presents this transition from the subjective to the objective poet in Sordello as a mirror of his own modern poetic development, and to foreground his poetry as the next step in the objective expression of Shelley’s idealism.

Despite the obvious resonance between Sordello and German philosophy, Browning was emphatic that he had not read Fichte, Schelling or Hegel. It is entirely possible that considering Browning’s familiarity with the Schlegelian theory of classical and romantic epistemology, and with the philosophical bent of his mind—an inclination toward abstract metaphysical thought that infuriated his contemporary reviewers—that he would have made the same connection as Friedrich Schlegel, who Bonaparte notes was himself the philosopher of the German Romantic movement, between the inward romantic soul of the Christian paradigm and the philosophy of idealism without knowing of these works. Yet it is clear that Browning was indeed aware of trends in philosophical idealism. Even if Browning had not read Fichte, he would have been familiar with his philosophy through Carlyle who used his ideas as the foundation for his lectures On Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (1832), lectures that Browning attended. In setting up the transcendental basis of his analysis, Carlyle recounts how:

Fichte the German philosopher delivered, some forty years ago at Erlangen, a highly remarkable course of lectures on this subject: ‘Ueber das Wesen des Gelehrten, On the Nature of the Literary Man.’ Fichte, in conformity with the Transcendental Philosophy, of which he was a distinguished teacher, declares first: That all things which we see or work with in this Earth, especially we
ourselves and all persons, are as a kind of vesture or sensuous Appearance: that under all there lies, as the essence of them, what he calls the “Divine Idea of the World;” this is the Reality which “lies at the bottom of all Appearance.” To the mass of men no such divine Idea is recognizable in the world; they live merely, says Fichte, among the superficialities, practicalities and shows of the world, not dreaming that there is anything divine under them. (99)

The fact that Browning would have known of Fichte through Carlyle is also clear from a letter he received from Joseph Arnould asking if he had read any of the transcendentalist philosophers including Fichte, whom he recognized as the foundation of Carlyle’s work (14, 347-351). Indeed the influence of Carlyle’s idealism on Browning’s objective poetry cannot be overstated and this study will often discuss the productive symbiosis between them. Moreover, Browning shows his awareness of the philosophies of Fichte and Schelling in the monologue “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” (1855), where the distinction between them is key to the symbolic meaning of the poem. And we will see in the following chapter how “Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books” is critical for understanding Browning’s relationship to idealism where the young Boehme is used as an example of the objective poet who sees the material world as an objective manifestation of the divine. Indeed this poem might point to the reason why Browning felt the need to refute his knowledge of the German philosophers because in it he presents his conviction that the true transcendentalism cannot be known through systematic philosophy, the logical deductions of the mind, but only in poetry, which is an act of imagination.

That the Schlegelian conception of romantic epistemology, and the perceived culmination of this subjectivity in the objective development of romantic idealism,
influences Browning’s poetic development can be seen in the similarity that he found
between his own concept of soul and Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy of will and
its embodiment in the world of representation. The affinity that Browning’s perceived
between himself and the German philosopher shows that his idea of soul has a much
broader philosophical meaning than the individual spirit, and that it defines
Browning’s understanding of embodiment and its significance for objective, dramatic
poetry. In a letter to Mrs Ernest Benzon—written after he had read a biography of
Schopenhauer, given to him by Mrs FitzGerald in 1876—Browning describes the
affinities between his concept of soul and Schopenhauer's will:

I gain an adequate notion of Schopenhauer and what he accounts his
grand discovery. So much of it as I acknowledge for truth as I have
believed in them from my earliest youth...the distinction and pre-
eminence of the Soul from and over the intelligence— “Soul” in the
evident sense of Schopenhauer's “Will”—And the fact was at once so
realized by me, that I am sure it must show through my writings, here
and there as their substratum. (Letter to Mrs. Ernest Benzon)

Even though Browning did not know of Schopenhauer earlier in his career, he saw the
similarity between his idea of soul and Schopenhauer's concept of will so
emphatically that he considers it to be the epistemological foundation, “the
substratum” of his poetic works. Although Browning seems taken aback by the deep
correlation that he finds between himself and Schopenhauer, this discovery is not
surprising because Browning’s ideas about art and epistemology come out of the
earlier context of idealism that also culminated in Schopenhauer's work. I will turn
now to the similarity between Browning’s notion of soul and mind and
Schopenhauer’s will and its embodiment in the world of representation because it
reveals the importance of idealism for Browning’s realism and it provides the foundation for the symbolic language that Browning uses to express his poetics.

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argues that there are two aspects to the world, each aspect being dependent on and inseparable from the other. The world of representation is the objective material world of phenomena as they exist in space and time. This is the world of empirical perception and is the manifestation of the other aspect of the world, which is the will. The will is the realm of the subject and exists entirely outside of time and space, and Schopenhauer explains that his idea of the will is analogous to Immanuel Kant’s concept of the noumenal: it is “the being-in-itself of every thing in the world, and is the sole kernel of every phenomenon” (118). The will is a universal substrate, encompassing and comprising the essences of the world; as opposed to the mere representation and appearance of phenomena, the will is the thing-in-itself.

Schopenhauer says that in contrast to the groundless world of will, the world of representation that is governed by the laws of cause and effect is perceived by the faculty of the understanding. The senses supply the understanding with data from the material world that is then passed into the reflective consciousness of the reason. He combines these branches of knowledge—sense, understanding and reason—into what he calls the principle of sufficient reason, which may be understood as defining the laws that govern conceptual thought; however, Schopenhauer argues that these laws can never show us the inner nature or will of things because, in belonging to the world of cause and effect, they can only show “mere connexions, relations, of one representation to another, form without any content” (121). The will as thing-in-itself cannot be subject to direct investigation, as it is not the object of knowledge; consequently, the faculty of thought or understanding can never penetrate past the
phenomenal and into the noumenal, or the inner essence of things. Crucially, while Kant maintains the impossibility of accessing the noumenal, Schopenhauer distinguishes himself in asserting that although the rational mind can only know the how and not the what of phenomena, we can nevertheless search for the inner meaning of things in the realm of existence which is completely different from representation—in the world of will. This has an epistemological significance for Schopenhauer, who argues that the true opposite of rational knowledge is feeling, or the intuition of the imagination, which, in contrast to the logical faculties that perceive the world of representation, allows us to intuit the will.

In “With Charles Avison,” Browning avers the difficulty of conceptualizing soul—Schopenhauer's will—and seeks to compare it with mind, which he sees as corresponding to Schopenhauer's principle of sufficient reason. Browning uses architectural imagery to connote the processes of the mind after he imagines his reader asking for “an illustrative image” (l. 150) to help define what is meant by soul. Browning visualizes the mind as a worker who seeks to “o'erarch a gulf” (l. 153) and who, in using facts, assesses, connects, assimilates and builds in order to construct knowledge: “He digs, transports, / Shapes and, through enginery—all sizes, sorts, / Lays stone by stone until a floor compact / Proves our bridged causeway” (ll. 153-156). While the precision of these varied movements of the mind are “easy even, to descry, describe” (l. 174), the soul is “an element which works beyond our guess” (l. 160). Browning's soul is envisioned as a formless voice that comes from within and undulates under the mind. It is the “unsounded sea—whose lift of surge / Spite of all superstructure” of the mind, “lets emerge, / In flower and foam, Feeling from out the deeps” (ll. 162-163). It is important to remember that here Browning means “feeling” not in its empirical sense but, along with Schopenhauer, as a profound intuition of the
Although Browning traces the indefinable nature of soul, he asserts that ultimately it seeks to find form and to body itself forth in the material world:

Yet wherefore heaving sway and restless roll
This side and that, except to emulate
Stability above? To match and mate
Feeling with knowledge,—make as manifest
Soul's work as Mind's work... (ll. 183-187)

In using metaphors of encasing viscosity to show how soul endeavors to embody itself in forms of the material world—“run mercury into a mould like lead” (l. 192) and “shoot / Liquidity into a mould” (ll. 209-210)—Browning parallels Schopenhauer's assertion that will is embodied in the world of representation. The similarity that Browning recognized between his concept of soul and its embodiment in mind and Schopenhauer’s philosophy reveals his conviction that in the romantic paradigm there are two sides to the world: the inward one that looks to the noumenal and the outward one that looks to the material world of cause and effect. This is epistemological for Browning, just as it is for Schopenhauer, because it is the faculty of reason, or mind, that engages with the laws of the material world but it is feeling that accesses the inward realm of the ideal.

Browning asserts that a path to the knowledge of what lies beyond rational knowledge is possible through feeling but also through what he calls the fancy. It is important not to misunderstand what Browning means by this term. The use of shared vocabulary to designate different concepts can easily lead amiss the interpretation of philosophical language in the nineteenth century, as Bonaparte has shown. Thus, although fancy for Coleridge and for Shelley designates the empiricist conception of
the associative imagination, Browning makes it clear in *La Saisiaz* that he uses the term fancy, in the same way as Dickens, to refer to the German Romantic and the Shellyian sense of the imagination that can access transcendent truth. Using the same language as Schopenhauer’s principle of sufficient reason, he exclaims that “What before caused all the causes, what effect of all effects / Haply follows, — these are fancy” (*La Saisiaz* ll. 225-6.), and he expresses this more simply in “Gerard de Lairesse” when he asserts that fancy deals with “fact unseen but no less fact the same” (l. 152), or in other words with facts that the senses cannot see and that the reason cannot discern.

It is this foundational notion of the dual aspect of the world that is integral to the formulation of Browning’s objective poetics and its representation in drama. It also underlies the symbolic language that he developed in *Sordello* and to which he returns throughout all of his poetry. Indeed, observing the mystical aspect of Browning’s plays, *Luria* and *A Soul’s Tragedy*, a critic for *The New Quarterly Review* remarks, “Not only, like Walter Savage Landor, does he aim at the peculiar in his mode of thinking out and executing his subjects, but he has also invented a symbolic language exclusively his own, which requires interpretation. The latter, of course, has been a work of time” (14, 385-386).

This symbolic language that Browning developed early incorporates a series of ostensible polarities that represent the dual aspect of the world, yet rather than being diametrically opposite they are dependent on and inseparable from each other. Common pairs that Browning uses are “soul and body,” “fancy and fact”, “music and speech,” “poetry and prose,” “reality and tradition,” “soul and thought” and “song and act,” among many others. These dualities will also be integral to Browning’s concept of lyric and drama, to which I will return shortly. All of these terms correspond with
Schopenhauer’s “will and representation” and Carlyle's phrase, most commonly used throughout his lectures, of “reality and semblance.” Browning’s sense of the double composition of reality is also expressed succinctly in his metaphor for the two sides of the moon in “One Word More” where the dark side looks to the inward—the infinite—and the light side looks to the outward—embodiment.

Browning’s symbolic language provides a different framework for looking at the terms subjective and objective, one which serves to expand the traditional definition of these terms as comprising the distinction between egoistic and impersonal poetry, idealism and realism, Romanticism and empiricism, individual relativity and empirical observation and so on. Although on the one hand these are all important categories, there are far reaching implications for how we interpret Browning’s poetry if we recognize that these seeming opposites are for Browning combined into the dialectical relationship between the spiritual and its embodiment in the material. Browning developed this symbolic language throughout the seven years he worked on *Sordello* and it is derived from his exploration of the classical and romantic paradigms and the relationship between subjective and objective idealism.

As part of this symbolic language, Browning’s terms subjective and objective are derived from the common currency of German Romantic idealism, which he alludes to when he refers in the *Essay* to the word objective, “as the phrase now goes,” and also when Elizabeth Barrett says, “you have in your vision two worlds, or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective and objective in the habits of your mind. You can deal with abstract thought and with human passion in the most passionate sense. Thus, you have an immense grasp in Art” (10, 25-7). That these terms are understood in the context of idealism is apparent from the way Elizabeth correlates the subjective position with the abstraction of Browning’s
metaphysical thought and the objective with human passion, which she emphasizes in its “most passionate sense” to show that she is not talking about feeling as an empirical emotion but as a physical manifestation of the spiritual. Her letter reiterates that the subjective and the objective perspectives comprise the double vision of two worlds: one that perceives the underlying meaning of the noumenal and the other its manifestation in phenomena. This is also the realization that Aurora Leigh comes to when she exclaims that the poet “Holds firmly by the natural, to reach / The spiritual beyond it,—fixes still / The type with mortal vision, to pierce through / With eyes immortal, to the antetype / Some call the ideal,—better called the real” (7, ll. 19-23).

Thus while the subjective poet seeks the eternal truths of Plato through the soul, it is the objective poet who looks to the ideal in its material embodiment: his “endeavour has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain)” (281).

Although in embodiment the objective is necessarily an imperfect copy, since the objective is a manifestation of the spiritual it is still informed by the ideal, which has far reaching implications for Browning’s view of the empirical world and for his role as the objective poet. Indeed Browning says in the Essay that the objective poet reproduces the world of phenomena “with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow-men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction.” This ability has been “obtained through the poet’s double faculty of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply than it is possible to the average mind, at the same time that he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole” (281). Like Elizabeth’s letter, Browning refers here to a “double faculty” that can perceive the transcendent
meaning but also has the sympathy and insight to see the ideal in its necessarily lower material manifestations as well. It is essential to note that this concept of sympathy does not imply relativity, as Robert Langbaum argues and to which I will return, but rather Browning’s commitment to discern truth in its myriad embodiments—to see that “truth is one as it is manifold” (Essay on Shelley 295). This idea of sympathy and its relation to symbolic embodiment will be a key issue for the interpretation of Browning’s concept of drama in the plays and in the monologue form.

The notion of helping mankind to spiritually see is integral to Browning’s realism; thus in Sordello it is the objective poet, or the Maker-See, who strives to reveal the relationship between the ideal and the real so that man can endeavor to act in the world on the knowledge of soul, which Browning likened to Schopenhauer’s will to emphasize its broader meaning as noumenal truth. For Browning, this deeper insight is the ability to see the material world as a symbol that bodies forth its inner spiritual meaning. Indeed, in his defense of the naturalist painter, Francis Furini, Browning criticizes what he sees as the “uninstructed” empiricist who, in looking at the material world, “Would take all outside beauty—film that's furled / About a star—for the star's self, endure /No guidance to the central glory” (ll.194-96). Although Browning criticizes those artists who take the temporal world as the aim of life in and of itself as opposed to a symbol that points to its inner meaning, he thinks it is worse to “wish all but the vapor well away, / And sky's pure product thickened from earth's bog” (ll. 194-99). For Browning, although the physical world is a sign that points to a significance beyond it, it is more important for the artist to focus on the reality that comprises the sign. Yet starting from the foundation of idealism, Browning’s conviction is that the inner meaning of the material can only be perceived by trusting to the “soul’s insight” (l. 201) as it is this “better sense” that “finds / An orb within
each halo” and “bids gross flesh / Free the spirit-pattern” (ll. 204-6)—the “spirit-pattern” being the noumenal substrate of reality. It is only when the uninstructed observer, “the vulgar eye” starts from a merely temporal perspective that he sees only the external material form, mistaking it for the aim of life rather than realizing that it is a sign that points to its inner spiritual essence.

Browning discusses this same conviction in “With Bernard de Mandeville,” when Browning speaks through Mandeville to respond to Carlyle's exclamation in the poem that if the First Cause, or God, is beyond the comprehension of the finite mind, then it can only be spoken of in abstraction. Browning points out that if on a map of Goethe's estate we saw the symbol A or B written in place of the actual building, we would not be so foolish as to quibble that they do not look the same. He says that this is no “More foolish than our mortal purblind way / Of seeking in the symbol no mere point / To guide our gaze through what were else inane, / But things—their solid selves?” (ll. 185-8). For Browning the material world is not the only reality but a symbol that we must “Look through the sign to the thing signified” (l. 192). The sign is not an arbitrary linguistic construct for Browning but refers to the external material forms, as seen in phenomena and through man’s actions in the world, which in their embodiments at once obfuscate and signify the inward noumenal meaning. Although Browning does lament the elusive nature of language throughout his poetry, it is only because he sees it as belonging to the realm of mind, which cannot fully express the internal signification that is accessed through fancy and feeling—an epistemological distinction that explains the important comparison that Browning makes between language and music in his symbolic representation of his objective poetics.

In Red Cotton Night-Cap County, or Turf and Towers (1873), Browning returns again to the issue of epistemology and symbolic embodiment. Referring to the
“vulgar eye,” the same phrase that he used in “Francis Furini” to discuss symbolism, Browning makes the distinction between empirical and spiritual knowledge. An important theme for Browning is that the empirical eye sees the material world as it exists in its material relations, but that it is soul that perceives the inner noumenal reality—that which is “signified”:

Nothing is prominently likeable
To vulgar eye without a soul behind,
Which, breaking surface, brings before the ball
Of sight, a beauty buried everywhere.
If we have souls, know how to see and use,
One place performs, like any other place.
The proper service every place on earth
Was framed to furnish man with: serves alike
To give him note that, through the place he sees,
A place is signified he never saw,
But, if he lack not soul, may learn to know. (ll. 54-64)

Browning shares his sense of symbolic embodiment and the role of the “Maker-See” with Carlyle, who dedicates a whole chapter to symbols in *Sartor Resartus* and refers to the concept of the “Seeing-Eye” throughout his writings. Deeply influenced by German Romanticism, Carlyle argues that “in the Symbol proper, what we can call a Symbol, there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodyment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as if it were, attainable there” (166). Carlyle explains how the symbol draws the infinite into the finite so that, although we cannot perceive the unadulterated infinite, we can in fact experience some intimation of it.
Browning’s conviction that the material world is a symbolic embodiment of the spiritual also defines his view of symbolic art, as he clearly states in his well-known declaration to John Ruskin that “I know that I don’t make out my conception by my language, all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite” (Litzinger and Smalley 12). The key point here is that even though Browning concedes that fully realizing the ideal is impossible, he still proclaims symbolic embodiment as the ultimate goal of art. Indeed the fact that Browning uses the same German Romantic terminology here as Carlyle compellingly reveals symbolic embodiment as his credo.

As the symbol partakes of the finite and the infinite, for Browning it is an embodiment that both obscures and expresses the transcendent. Carlyle makes the same assertion when he observes that “in a Symbol there is concealment and yet revelation: here, therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a doubled significance” (166). For Carlyle, and as we see throughout Browning’s own symbolic language, silence represents the inexpressible infinite whereas speech represents the conceptual limits of knowledge that can only perceive the material world. Since the symbol partakes of both the ideal and the real it bodies forth the divine inner meaning of reality, yet in the very act of symbolic embodiment there is a space between the ideal and its manifestation in material form. However, this space between the ideal and the real in the symbols that comprise material reality is crucial for Browning’s objective poetics. Indeed, in “Francis Furini” Browning asserts that the objective artist should not enmesh the ideal in the real too closely; otherwise the “vulgar eye” will miss the spiritual import (ll. 206-8). For Browning, “Type needs anti-type” (l. 483) as it is precisely this tension between the ideal and the real that calls attention to the existence of another order of existence, and it is through this discrepancy that Browning seeks to facilitate spiritual sight in his plays and monologues.
In her study of German Romanticism and its influence on the Victorians, Bonaparte shows how this tension between the ideal and the real is the essence of German Romantic irony. Bonaparte analyzes the significance of Friedrich Schlegel's declaration that irony does not belong to rhetoric or style but to philosophy, showing how his seemingly contradictory statements about irony are actually different iterations of his central conviction that irony comprises the antagonism between the eternal Platonic truths, which are perceived by the imagination, and the multiplicity of views and possibilities that are available in the material realm. Demonstrating how German Romantic irony constitutes the productive space between the real and the ideal, Bonaparte counters the perspective of critics who argue that Schlegel's concept of irony anticipates the skepticism of modern irony. On the contrary, Bonaparte asserts that for Schlegel, and the Victorians, this space between the ideal and the real becomes the joyful plane of infinite striving, wherein the artist can seek to remake the real in the image of the ideal even while knowing that in part he will fail.

Browning’s sense of philosophic irony has been seen by some critics to be an indication of his skepticism. Although Browning’s religious vision is taken for granted, the critical emphasis is placed on the assumption that Browning sees no meaningful relation between the ideal and the real in the empirical realm. Herbert Tucker notes that Browning's explanation to Ruskin constitutes a clear statement of his poetics, yet his interpretation of Browning's formulation assumes a post-structural perspective on the part of the poet. Identifying Browning's poetics as anticipatory of post-structural ideas, Tucker regards Derrida's term “différance” as a useful analytical tool for Browning's poetry and proposes that Browning's concept of the infinite, “describes not some eternal realm above mutability, but the conviction of endlessness or processionality to which the careful imperfections of his art of disclosure give
poetic currency” (14). In the section subtitled “Style: putting the infinite into the finite,” Tucker therefore maintains that “Browning's “infinite” and his “finite” need each other for mutual definition,” which suggests that the transcendent is merely a straw man figure for Browning, or a rhetorical device to facilitate a dialectic of deferred meaning. This assumption leads Tucker to conclude that Browning's persistent deferral of meaning indicates a corresponding belief in the impossibility of metaphysical closure, or the possibility of transcendent truth.

The disagreement over the nature of Browning’s idealism and his realism is perhaps due to the assumption that irony necessarily undermines the symbolic method. Indeed, Paul de Man posits that “the act of irony... reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality” and as such irony and allegory are linked in their “common demystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide” (222). However, it is the contention of this study that Browning's concept of symbolism is entirely compatible with his sense of irony because of his conviction that, in the romantic paradigm, symbolic embodiment necessarily both conceals and reveals transcendent truth. This interpenetration of symbolism and irony is analyzed at length by Browning in *Sordello* through his comparison of classical and romantic ontology, which I discuss at length in the following chapter. It is the realization that the ideal can never be fully accessible in the romantic paradigm that leads the Romantics, and the Victorians after them, to argue for the necessity of symbols as the only possibility for an approximate expression of the ideal, as Bonaparte has shown. I argue that Browning's poetics are not based on negating the possibility of meaning; rather through the space of irony, or
the gap between the infinite and the finite that he sees as inherent in the symbol, Browning seeks a way of conceiving a relationship between the real and the ideal.

Critics who see Browning as a poet who looks to both the relative and the absolute place his poetics within the context of his foundational religious beliefs, especially the concept of the Incarnation. Raymond Williams asserts that Browning's sense of “human experience as poised between the absolute and the relative is reinforced by his religious belief, the profound influence of the spirits and tenets of Christianity,” and thus, in the context of his religious faith, Williams argues that it is misguided to view Browning's humanism as a rejection of Shelley's transcendental idealism (196). Thomas J. Collins and William Whitla also view the incarnation as the religious foundation for the form of the dramatic monologue, which they see as various incarnations in space and time. Also like Williams, David Shaw finds the foundation of Browning’s rhetorical method in the dialectic between the real and the ideal, or the material and the divine, which is symbolized in the Incarnation.

In his study of Browning's later poetry, Clyde De L. Ryals also perceives the Incarnation to be the basis for Browning's poetics: “Just as God makes plain the central truth of life by means of the Incarnation, so does the poet through his imaginative vision impart value to disordered phenomena by penetrating the illusions of existence and revealing the true nature of things” (19). Yet he sees this as a departure from the ironic method that defined his early plays and monologues, positing that it was the influence of Elizabeth Barrett’s Christian moral vision that changed Browning's early aesthetics and philosophy. I would argue, however, that Browning's identification with Barrett Browning's religious vision did not actually facilitate a fundamental change in his poetics because, as a keen reader of German Romantic works, she also declared throughout her letters there to be a striking affinity
between her own ideas and German Romantic idealism. I propose in this study that it is not only in the idea of the Incarnation that Browning embraces both realism and idealism, the facts of the material world and the existence of Platonic truths—“not what man sees, but God sees”—but also in romantic symbolism, and that this notion of symbolism is the foundation for his development of dramatic form.

To understand how drama relates to Browning’s concept of symbolism and the irony of embodiment, I would like to refer back to the foundational symbolic language that Browning uses throughout his poetry to denote the two sides of the world: the inward essence of reality and its manifestation in the real. In the context of this vocabulary, Browning’s idea of lyric and drama can be seen as one pair in the series of dualities that express this relationship. Browning emphasizes this reciprocal dynamic in his explanation to André Victor Amédée de Ripert-Monclar regarding the form of Paracelsus, which he sees as the distinction between a poem and a drama:

Now, select any Drama you please, which comprises the history of a Thought or a Passion, &, putting yourself in the position of the author, view it as a conception of your own & consider that, having rêvé this History, you are about to give it a permanent existence .. to reduce it to language. Do you desire that it shall be Read not Acted? Follow throughout the whole, only what Raleigh calls the “mind of the piece,” as a purple thread through a varied woof .. discarding as unnecessary, the external machinery which would develop it, & only preserving the Result which was to be traced, however dimly throughout– Then expand this simple mood—& you will have a Poem like my own: .. Shall it be Acted not Read—follow the contrary course .. make prominent & efficient the influencing incidents & persons .. make that inferred only, which in the Poem was detailed .. & you have a Drama again. (3, 125-128)
Using the same parallel that Elizabeth Barrett made between the subjective and objective poet—or between abstract thought and passion—and what she saw as Browning’s dual vision, Browning starts from the assumption that a drama either delineates soul, a “Thought,” or its manifestation, a “Passion.” In order to emphasize the inward transcendent, or the “mind of the piece,” the poet must discard the “external machinery” wherein soul is made manifest so as to trace “this simple mood.” This emphasis on the internal would make it a poem to be read, which Browning understood, like Shelley, as “the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth,” and this is how he defines the form of Paracelsus. However, in order to focus on manifestation, Browning explains that the poet would have to simply reinstate the incidents of persons and events in the real that comprise the objective framework of space and time through which the soul is embodied. For Browning, this would make the poem a drama to be acted rather than read, a reversal he attempted with his plays. Browning’s distinction between a poem and a drama reiterates the dialectical relationship that he sees between the subjective and objective poet and between the lyrical and dramatic mode. It also indicates Browning’s conviction that the enactment of theatrical performance, in contrast to the read drama, is integral to the work of symbolic embodiment.

That Browning’s concept of drama is derived from idealism can be seen in its similarity to Richard Wagner's concept of music drama. Although Wagner would not be known to Browning until later in the poet’s career (he refers to him in “Charles Avison”), as another figure who was influenced by the ideas of German Romanticism, and particularly Schopenhauer, Wagner's ideas are strikingly similar to Browning's. Wagner agrees with Schopenhauer that music is the most immediate expression of the will; therefore he uses it, like Browning, as a symbol for the noumenal realm that is
made manifest in the real through the objectivity of drama. In his 1870 *Essay on Beethoven*, Wagner argues that:

> We consequently should not go far astray, if we defined Music as man's qualification *a priori* for fashioning the Drama. Just as we construct for ourselves the world of semblances through application of the laws of Time and Space existing *a priori* in our brain, so this conscious representation of the world's Idea in Drama would thus be foreordained by those inner laws of Music, operating in the dramatist equally unconsciously with the laws of Causality we bring into employment for apperception of the phenomenal world. (106-7)

Wagner says that time and space are the framework upon which the phenomenal world is constructed and that this is expressed in drama; however, since phenomena manifests the internal essence of things, the dramatist also creates according to the inner laws of music through which the ineffable is expressed. For Wagner, music and drama should work together so that we can perceive how the external shapes of drama have come from the internal essence of things and also how the objectivity of drama shows the essence of things as they are projected in a concrete form.

Thus in his *Opera and Drama* (1851) Wagner argues that it is drama that must be the artwork of the future because “the true Artwork can only be engendered by an advance from imagination into actuality, i.e. Physicality” (120). In speaking of Shakespeare, Wagner explains that: “The mastery of the outward stuff, so as to shew the inner view of the essence of that stuff, could only be brought to a successful issue by setting the subject itself before the senses in all the persuasiveness of actuality; and this was to be achieved in Drama and nothing else” (127). In his “Essay on Beethoven,” Wagner exclaims, “We have called Music the revelation of the inner
vision of the Essence of the world, and Shakespeare we might term a Beethoven who goes on dreaming though awake” (108). What Wagner means by this is that in drama Shakespeare embodies in the real world the transcendent realm of music accessed by Beethoven. Wagner’s comparison of Beethoven and Shakespeare as the relationship between the inward-noumenal and the outward-embodiment, music and drama, are the equivalent of Browning’s Shelley and Shakespeare, the subjective lyrical poet and the objective dramatist. Indeed, as we will see, Browning often uses the symbol of music to define Shelley’s subjective poetry in relation to his own objective, dramatic method. Therefore, it is the conviction of this study that Browning does not see himself in opposition to Shelley’s subjective poetry and idealism but rather as the objective poet, like Shakespeare, who embodies his idealism in the real.

Coleridge also analyzes Shakespeare, as the objective poet, in terms of idealism. Although Coleridge denounces the modern theater for emphasizing the senses at the expense of imagination, he also acknowledges that, in its representation of visual reality, the drama has the most potential to realize the truths of the imagination. In his Biographia Literaria, Coleridge argues that the moralist and the metaphysician can find “the happiest illustrations of general truths and the subordinate laws of human thought and action” in Shakespeare's tragic and comic characters, yet he is quick to note that he is not “recommending abstractions: for these class-characteristics, which constitute the instructiveness of a character, are so modified and particularized in each person of the Shakespearian Drama, that life itself does not excite more distinctly that sense of individuality which belongs to real existence” (219). For Coleridge, Shakespeare's characters embody truths in the multiplicities of the material world:

It was Shakespeare's prerogative to have the universal, which is
potentially in each particular, opened out to him, the homo generalis, 
not as an abstraction from observation of a variety of men, but as the 
substance capable of endless modifications, of which his own personal 
existence was but one, and to use this one as the eye that beheld the 
other, and as the tongue that could convey the discovery (Lectures on 
Shakespeare vol 2, 45)

In comparison to Shakespeare, Coleridge says that because Beaumont and Fletcher do 
not perceive the particular to be an embodiment of the universal, their syntheses are 
constructed haphazardly through empirical observation. In his popular Lectures on 
Shakespeare, Coleridge compares Shakespeare's dramatic imagination to the 
symbolic view of the natural world, which unfolds and realizes the ideal: “But nature, 
who works from within by evolution and assimilation according to a law, cannot do it. 
Nor could Shakespeare, for he too worked in the spirit of nature, by evolving the germ 
within by the imaginative power according to an idea” (239).

Browning’s choice of Shakespeare as the archetypal objective poet is part of 
the larger Romantic discourse that views the dramatist as the objective iteration of 
romantic idealism. In his Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, August Schlegel 
defines Shakespeare as the pinnacle of romantic art in England. Since soul is no 
longer perfectly embodied in the temporal world as it was in the classical age, in the 
romantic paradigm man turns inward to contemplate his transcendence. In romantic 
art, the poet seeks to embody the inward noumenal soul but this can only be bodied 
forth in approximate symbols in contrast to the consummate symbols of classical art. 
Coleridge states that in romantic art “even the human form, must, in order to satisfy 
the mind, be brought into connexion with, and be in fact symbolical of, the infinite; 
and must be considered in some enduring, how-ever shadowy and indistinct, point of
Thus the external form of romantic art is comprised of symbols that body forth the inward soul.

Influenced by August Schlegel’s distinction between classical and romantic art, Coleridge posits in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* that in contrast to classical art where character is embodied in the external action, the transcendent interiority of character creates action in romantic art: “the moderns revere the infinite, and affect the indefinite as a vehicle of the infinite;—hence their passions, their obscure hopes and fears, their wandering through the unknown, their grander moral feelings, their more august conception of man as man, their future rather than their past—in a word, their sublimity” (19). Coleridge argues that since form and action were paramount in classical art, as indicated by the strictures of time and place, it was addressed to the senses; whereas Shakespeare’s plays, as romantic dramas, are addressed to the reason, which “is independent of time and space; it has nothing to do with them: and hence the certainties of reason have been called eternal truths” (26).

Critics have recognized the importance of Shakespeare for Browning's concept of drama and objectivity, but they have placed his engagement with Romantic Shakespearean criticism within the tradition of empiricism rather than idealism. In his seminal study of the development of the dramatic monologue, Robert Langbaum analyzes the influence of Romantic Shakespearean criticism and sees its influence on nineteenth-century drama as an important precursor to the dramatic monologue form. Yet, in not acknowledging the influence of German Romantic ideas to which these English writers declare themselves indebted, Langbaum places Romantic dramatic criticism within the empirical paradigm.

Langbaum observes that English Romantic drama reverses the Aristotelian concept of action that creates character to one where character creates action;
however he does not examine this through the distinction of the classical and the romantic but rather in terms of psychology. In his analysis, Langbaum argues that this transition in drama came about through the Romantic preoccupation with character psychology in Shakespeare's plays at the expense of ideas, and that it is “in the isolation of character from plot that we can best see the psychological interpretation of Shakespeare as dissolving dramatic structure and leading us toward a dramatic monologue” (177). He suggests that the empirical approach of the monologue leads the reader to sympathize with the historically and psychologically realized persona, which then leads to the perception of the relativity of all judgment.

Loy D. Martin also analyzes Browning’s dramatic form through psychology. Observing an ironic tension in the speaking subject of the dramatic persona between a Cartesian epistemology in which the self is ontologically unified and a postmodern epistemology in which the self is constructed through a network of reciprocal interactions, Loy perceives in Browning’s dramatic monologues a “radical de-sublimation” whereby he moves from a Romantic emphasis on Being to what Derrida calls “The Written Being,” a subject which is constituted through speech and as such is always in process. As a result of this tension, Martin posits that: “The dramatic monologue has fairly well abandoned the project of 'presenting' an underlying wholeness. It recognizes the self-destroying quality of the idea of wholeness, an idea that can only be realized in discourse. The idea of wholeness is self-destroying in Browning because the subject of its discourse—the discourse of the dramatic monologue—can never be a discrete entity” (109). For Loys the discrepancy he observes between the ostensible totality and modern fragmentation in the monologue implies a rejection of Romantic epistemology.

Similarly in her analysis of Browning and his Romantic inheritance, Britta
Martens contends that Browning's dramatic, impersonal poetics reveals his affinity with twentieth-century and twenty-first-century challenges to the notion of a stable and unified authorial self. She claims that even in the later poetry where we often find Browning speaking in *propria persona*, his voice is presented as a dramatic utterance so as to deliberately undermine the possibility of an absolute authorial expression, which in turn undermines the identification of his voice with Romantic poetics.

Martens posits that Browning's dramatic poetics shares in “our suspicion of Romantic aesthetics,” and anticipates postmodern theories of identity and also the subjective construction of meaning (3). Therefore, in seeing an epistemological distinction between the subjective and the objective poet, Martens concludes that Browning's choice of dramatic form throughout his career negates the Romantic idea of transcendent truth and the ability of the visionary poet to impart visionary knowledge.

In his study of Browning’s idea of action in character, E. Warwick Slinn posits that Shelley's conviction that poetry pierces through the veil of the material world to reveal its transcendent meaning serves to question the very objective nature of reality itself shifting the perspective in nineteenth-century poetry “from what is perceived to the processes of perception, from the structure of an external world to the structuring powers of individual minds” (1). In placing Browning’s concept of action in character within the empirical paradigm, Slinn argues that Browning's turn to drama reveals his break with Shelley and Romantic epistemology: his “legacy from his early mentor Shelley is not the authority of the imagination, but a skepticism which although seeming at times to return him to an Enlightenment dualism, anticipates the more modern view that perception and conceptualising are barely separable” (7). Making the connection between Browning’s notion of internal action and the inevitable solipsism that Pater found in sensory perception, Slinn argues that the objective again
becomes subjective for Browning as he turns to dramatic form to explore the postmodern “fictions of identity”—the subjective and relative construction of meaning. Reframing Browning’s Romantic conviction that all poetry is a “putting of the infinite in the finite” within the context of psychology, Slinn argues that: “If there is any sense of the infinite in the finite in Browning’s poetry, once a favourite description of his aims, it is not a transcendence of limits but an ever-continuing regress into the mechanisms of a single moment in consciousness” (18). Thus Slinn’s psychological approach to Browning’s concept of drama implies an outward-inward trajectory where character is created through its interaction with external forces, in contrast to idealism where the inward consciousness denotes the noumenal soul and the objective refers to its manifestation, which is figured as an inward-outward trajectory. As Browning says in Paracelsus:

    Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
    From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
    There is an inmost center in us all,
    Where truth abides in fullness; all around,
    Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
    This perfect, clear perception, which is Truth.
    A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
    Binds it, and makes all error: and, to KNOW,
    Rather consists in opening out a way
    Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape
    Than in effecting entry for a light
    Supposed to be without. (ll. 726-37)

Yet Browning’s idealism does not negate the importance of psychology for his
dramatic poetry; nevertheless, the revelations of psychology and personality that are so important for his protagonists and the speakers of the dramatic monologue do not belong to the inward action, as it is seen, but rather to the difficulty of outward embodiment and the necessarily imperfect manifestation of the inward romantic soul, which becomes the site of productive irony for Browning’s plays and monologues.

Although recent criticism of Browning’s concept of drama views it in terms of psychology, and although this was to become the prevailing paradigm of the nineteenth century, Romantic critics, and the Victorians after them, were emphatic in their distinction between empiricism and idealism. In his essay “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare,” Charles Lamb contrasts the corporeal with the intellectual in his discussion of King Lear to show that he intends by the intellect something that is not reducible to material definitions—by which he means that our highest intellectual thoughts are transcendent. Lamb believes that while actors can imitate the empirical passions and emotions, these are only the outward expression of “the inner structure and workings of mind in character,” or the ineffable thoughts, but if the Macbeth, Iago or Richard are read rather than presented visually on the stage: “we think not so much of the crimes which they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity which prompts them to overleap those moral fences” (230). He maintains that in reading the plays enable the perception of “the sublime images, the poetry alone” (231), which does not refer to textual imagery or verse but to the expression of the ideal that is fully present to the mind.

This becomes an epistemological issue for Lamb when he claims that the ideal level of Shakespeare's plays cannot be perceived through the senses but only through the imagination, the faculty that perceives eternal truths. Lamb criticizes the contemporary stage, especially in its emphasis on elaborate costume and stage design,
because it leads to sensory perception at the expense of the imagination. In his
discussion of Othello, Lamb argues that reading the play leads to “the triumph of
virtue over accidents, of the imagination over the senses.” Yet watching it upon the
stage “when imagination is no longer the ruling faculty…we are left to our poor
unassisted senses” (232). Juxtaposing “virtue” with “accidents,” Lamb refers to a
transcendent sense of morality that is perceived by the imagination in contrast to the
mutable physiological reactions that are perceived by the senses; therefore, he
concludes that Shakespeare’s tragedies should be read rather than acted: “the reading
of a tragedy is a fine abstraction. It presents to the fancy just so much of external
appearances as to make us feel that we are among flesh and blood, while by far the
greater and better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal
machinery of the character” (235).

The differing approaches to Shakespearean criticism and its relationship to
Browning are inevitably complicated by the fact that distinct philosophical traditions
shared vocabulary and terminology in common that often mean entirely different
things, as Bonaparte has shown. Romantic dramatic criticism is one example of this
where it has been interpreted through empirical philosophy rather than the philosophy
of idealism, influencing the way in which Browning’s concept of drama has been seen
in relation to their works. For instance, while Donald Hair acknowledges that Lamb's
sense of abstraction refers to the transcendent soul, he links it to Locke's empirical
concept of a mental idea rather than to the German Romantic concept of a Platonic
idea. Hair perceives a correlation between Lamb's notion of abstraction and Locke's
understanding that language does not represent external signs but rather invisible
ideas within the mind, which are derived from sensory experience: “first, our
generalizations from experience (the sensations which come to us through our five
senses) and the names we attach to those generalizations, and secondly, the connections which the mind itself gives to generalizations, and the linking words which express those relations” (94).

In observing an analogy between Lamb's vocabulary and Locke's, Hair concludes that Locke's concept of ideas paves the way for the unacted drama of Romanticism, which probing the inner mind through language leads to Browning's psychological concept of drama. However, the empirical understanding of an idea as a mental operation based on sensory perceptions is entirely different to the Romantic concept of the Platonic idea—the eternal forms emphasized by Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry* that are apprehended by the faculty of imagination. Lamb makes it clear that Shakespeare's characters are not reducible to physical phenomena; therefore, the internal workings of the mind are not apprehended by the understanding, the logical processes that interpret sensory perception. Thus Lamb exclaims that in Shakespeare's characters there is something “which appeals too exclusively to the imagination, to admit of their being made objects to the senses without suffering a change or a diminution” (233). Similarly, Hazlitt argues that the plays of Shakespeare could be successfully performed in his own period because it had not yet encountered what he felt was the reductive empirical philosophy of mind: “The modern philosophy, which reduces the whole theory of mind to habitual impressions, and leaves the natural impulses of passion and imagination out of the account, had not then been discovered; or if it had, would have been little calculated for the uses of poetry” (124).

Thomas De Quincey's short essay on Shakespeare “on the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth,” is also a discussion about the limitation of the understanding in the interpretation of Shakespeare. De Quincey also asserts that the transcendent level of Shakespeare's plays cannot be apprehended through the understanding but only
through intuition, or feeling, which both Schopenhauer and Browning contend is the only way to perceive the inner reality and meaning of the world that lies beyond the external constraints of cause and effect. As someone who had studied German philosophy at Oxford and who often declared his admiration of German works, De Quincey conceives of the understanding as the faculty which interacts with the phenomena of the material world in contrast to feeling or intuition which accesses the noumenal. In his essay De Quincey argues that “the mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted; and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else; which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophical purposes” (192). To look at Shakespeare's plays philosophically, De Quincey maintains that we must turn to a different faculty than the understanding. This is why he could never explicate the meaning of the knocking at the gate scene in *Macbeth* through his understanding: it was only through his intuitive response that he finally comprehended its spiritual significance.

The Romantic conviction that held there were two ways of grasping Shakespeare’s work, whether through the imagination or the understanding, meant that the interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays became a philosophical endeavor. How this relates to Shakespeare’s significance as an objective poet can be seen in Schopenhauer’s conviction that there are two possible ways to grasp an actual object: either “purely objectively,” where the *idea* of the object—the will as it is manifested in phenomena—is perceived, or in its relations to other objects according to the principle of sufficient reason—the phenomena in its empirical relations—which is the very distinction that Coleridge makes between the romantic symbolic form of Shakespeare’s plays and the empirical dramas of Beaumont and Fletcher.

As the Romantics perceived two different ways of seeing the objective world,
it followed that they saw two types of drama, which as Browning says in his *Essay on Shelley* is the form that represents the world of manifestation and the doings of men. Drama was defined as either romantic or symbolic, where the action comprises the embodiment of ideas, or as empirical, where the action followed a plot that imitated the laws of space, time and causality. These distinct perspectives on drama and the theater entered into broader discussions about epistemology where the imagination was seen to be the faculty that perceived the world, and its representation in drama, as an embodiment of the ideal whereas it was the reason or understanding that saw it in only its external material form. This nineteenth-century dialogue between the philosophies of idealism and empiricism that was anchored in drama provides the intellectual context for Browning’s choice of Shakespeare as the archetypal objective poet and for his conception of his own plays and monologues.

This distinction between symbolic and realistic drama, idealism and empiricism, was instigated by Schlegel's massively popular *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*. In his *Lectures*, Schlegel defines symbolic drama as poetic, making it clear that he does not want the expression poetical to be misunderstood, exclaiming that he is “not now speaking of the versification of language and the ornaments of language; these, when not animated by some higher excellence, are the least effective on the stage” (19). He goes on to explain that he speaks of poetry “in the spirit and design of a piece; and this may exist in as high a degree when the drama is written in prose as in verse” (19). In order for drama to be poetic, Schlegel asserts that “it is necessary that a composition should be a mirror of ideas, that is, thoughts and feelings which in their character are necessary and eternally true, and soar above this earthly life, and also that it should exhibit them embodied before us” (19). Schlegel makes it clear here that he takes poetry to mean the expression of ideal truths, which soar to the
divine realm but are also made manifest in physical forms. Thus poetic drama is symbolic: it partakes of both idealism and empiricism because it embodies ideas into the observable real world. Schlegel emphasizes that without the spiritual component, “a drama becomes altogether prosaic and empirical, that is to say, patched together by the understanding out of the observations that it has gathered from literal reality” (19).

In his discussion of poetic drama and the theater, Schlegel asserts that it is necessary for the dramatic poet to “transport his hearers out of themselves, and as it were, take bodily possession of their attention.” He contends that “there is a species of poetry which gently stirs a mind attuned to solitary contemplation, as soft breezes elicit melody from the Aeolian harp,” which despite its excellent tones would be lost on the stage because “the grand requisite in a drama is to make this rhythm perceptible in the onward progress of the action” (20). Thus the key to drama for Schlegel is that it embodies or objectifies the lyricism of the subjective poet. Yet Schlegel makes it clear that the success of this endeavor “must always depend on the capacities and humours of the audience, and, consequently, on the national character in general, and the particular degree of mental culture” (20). Schlegel argues that the modern drama reflects a debased mental culture and that his inquiry into the ideas of drama from “the most distinguished nations in their most brilliant periods” is at the same time an attempt “to institute an inquiry into the means of ennobling and perfecting so important an art” (23).

In his Lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge agrees with Schlegel that successful embodiment on the stage depends upon public taste. Coleridge's clarification of what he means by public taste also explains what Schlegel understands by mental culture: “I do not mean that taste which merely springs from caprice or fashionable imitation, and which, in fact, genius can, and by degrees will, create for itself; but that which
arises out of wide-grasping and heart enrooted causes, which is epidemic, and in the very air that we breathe” (34). Coleridge sees public taste as the foundational mental assumptions of the audience, and the modern “dead palsy” of mind is its inability to see past the empirical into the ideal within it. In his critique of Bertram, Coleridge argues that the modern stage appeals only to the senses: it is sentimental rather than tragic, and it only emphasizes sensory stimulation and self-gratification. Coleridge compares modern drama with the bygone days of symbolic drama, arguing that “their tragic scenes were meant to affect us indeed, but within the bounds of pleasure, and in union with the activity both of our understanding and imagination” (Biographia Literaria 618), which again emphasizes the importance of drama for discussions of epistemology in Romantic and Victorian discourse.

It was the Romantic assumption that symbolic drama could not be rendered on the stage as it had become too empirical, which for Hazlitt was a reflection of the wider condition of mankind who tend to emphasize the senses at the expense of the imagination:

Poetry and the stage do not agree well together...the IDEAL can have no place on the stage, which is a picture without perspective; everything there in the foreground. That which was merely an airy shape, a dream, a passing thought, immediately becomes an unmanagable reality. Where all is left to the imagination (in the case of reading) every circumstance, near or remote, has an equal chance of being kept in mind, and tells according to the mixed impression of all that has been suggested. But the imagination cannot sufficiently qualify the actual impressions of the senses (121).

Hazlitt capitalizes ideal to emphasize that he means it in its philosophic sense, and
that his criticism of the stage is framed in specifically epistemological terms. Lamb also criticizes the modern day mind for its empirical outlook on the world and its necessarily detrimental effect on the theater and the comprehension of Shakespeare's plays. Where the purpose of symbolic art is to reveal embodiment, the theater only emphasizes the material form: “It seemed to embody and realize conceptions which had hitherto assumed no distinct shape. But dearly do we pay all our life afterwards for this juvenile pleasure, this sense of distinctness. When the novelty is passed, we find to our cost that, instead of realising an idea, we have only materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard and flesh and blood. We have let go of a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance” (222). As Janet Ruth Heller has observed in “Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and the Reader of Drama,” Lamb did not argue that Shakespeare should be read rather than performed because he was interested in psychology, but because he felt that an increasingly empirical audience could no longer apprehend the symbolic ideas embodied within the plays.

In his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley makes a similar correlation between the degradation of symbolic drama into the empirical drama and the philosophical condition of society. Shelley agrees with Schlegel that the true drama is poetic in that it embodies eternal truth, proclaiming that “the drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with a power of propagating its like wherever it may fall” (318). Shelley uses the metaphor of the prismatic light and the mirror, the same metaphors that Browning will use to define his own conception of dramatic form, to visualize how symbolic drama perceives the elemental forms, the white light, which is
then reflected or refracted in the prismatic rays of the embodied world. Thus drama is poetic for Shelley because it comprises symbolic embodiment—it is “the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (313).

Shelley argues that “in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathises with that decay” (318), which he perceives in the loss of poetic drama. Like Schlegel, Shelley exclaims that “it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or distinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life” (319). According to Shelley, drama loses its poetry because of “the calculating principle,” which reduces the ideal truths of poetic drama into the mere particulars of sensory stimulation and self-gratification. Shelley echoes Schlegel in his argument that “life may be preserved and renewed, if men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles,” and he declares that “the office and character of a poet participates in the divine nature as regards providence, no less than regards creation” (319), which is a call that Browning saw himself responding to.

The Victorians followed the Romantics in their concern that the stage was too empirical for poetic or symbolic drama. In his essay “Plays and Puritans,” Charles Kingsley refers to the prominent influence of German theories of art on the Victorian period when he declares that “the British Isles have been ringing for the last few years with the word 'Art' in its German sense; with 'High Art,' Symbolic Art, 'Ecclesiastical Art,' 'Dramatic Art,' 'Tragic Art,' and so forth.” However, he exclaims that despite all of these translations of German works, the English public do not appear to care that the stage is dead. In his condemnation of the contemporary stage, Kingsley rails against the common notion that the Puritans shut down the theaters because they
disliked art; rather he argues that the Puritans perceived the fact that drama was no
longer poetic, poetic in the Romantic sense of an ideal truth, and that it was this
empirical degradation of the stage that prompted them to put an end to dramatic art.
He states that rather than destroying the trajectory of drama, it was actually the
Puritans who were truly “dramatic” and “poetic” because, unlike the stage, their
actions bodied forth an ideal.

In his essay “On Certain Principles of Art in Works of Imagination,” Edward
Bulwer-Lytton agrees with Kingsley that the drama in England had become extinct:
“in our country, at present, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that there is no tragic
drama—scarcely any living drama at all...but the fact itself is so clear, that the Drama,
though in reality it is the highest order of poem with the exception of the Epic, seems
to have wholly dropped out of our consideration as belonging to any form of poetry
whatsoever” (310). Here Lytton follows the German Romantics, and quotes Hegel
specifically, arguing that artists should not seek a “servile copy of particulars” but
rather the 'idealized image of a truth” (312). In explaining that all art should “manifest
the general,” or embody the ideal, he argues that the symbolic art form of the
nineteenth century is the novel, as Bonaparte has shown. However, he also links the
goals of symbolic art to drama when he looks back briefly to Macready’s attempts to
reform the theater and the subsequent hope that playwrights would again be able to
embody their conceptions on the stage, which is the time period that Browning
himself started to write plays.

Barrett Browning’s close friend Richard Hengist Horne, who spoke of August
Schlegel in his letters to her, also applied German Romantic ideas about drama in his
“An Essay on Tragic Influence,” which he included as a preface to his verse drama
Gregory VII. Horne argues that the modern times, by reducing everything to tangible
reality, have damaged symbolic art. Similarly to Bulwer-Lytton, Horne contends that one problem that has arisen out of the modern frame of mind is the emphasis on imitating reality. Horne argues that the dramatic poet should not merely imitate the particulars of the natural world; rather he should “render the poetry of nature, the essential effects, individualised and generalised at the same time” (xvii). Thus, “we should not make the thing real, but a vivid illusion, embodying only the higher qualities of the reality” (xvii). Horne explains that the dramatic poet can manifest the poetry of nature through the passions, which are not sensory but an expression of the ideal: “Out of the heart's passionate exaltation, its anguish and despair, its desolate oblivion of time and the world's life, the essential truth of things cries with a loud voice, infallible as lasting, springing as they do from the fountain-head of enduring nature” (viii). Horne echoes the German and British Romantics in their epistemological analysis when he declares: “ideal art appeals to the heart and imagination, not to the measurements of the understanding; and this is why their fine essence is very apt to float off and escape at the material touch of analysis, discussion, and criticism” (xii). Using the same language as Elizabeth Barrett in her praise for Browning, Horne sees a double vision in symbolic drama that appeals to both “abstract and imaginative passions,” which “has its foundation in elementary truths, and high-wrought mental incitements and purposes, with which we are made intimate” (xv).

In a letter to Horne, Elizabeth Barrett wrote that she greatly admired his “Essay on Tragic Influence,” and praised it for its “noble philosophy & poetry;” however, she also accused Horne of giving too much honor to the stage and actors, exclaiming, “what Macready can touch Lear?” (4, 272-3). Elizabeth Barrett reiterates this distaste for the theater in a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, but at the same time in
italicizing “poetry” she clarifies her admiration for symbolic drama: “You must not ask any questions about my love for the drama. Is not the drama, a form, & a very noble one, of poetry?” (3, 207-9). Inquiring about the actor Mr. Forrest who was in talks about appearing in a play of Mitford's, Elizabeth Barrett echoes Lamb’s distinction between symbolic and empirical drama: “I shall like to hear from you whether he is or is not rather melodramatic than tragic,—and whether his physical does not obtrude itself into his intellectual” (3, 222-5). Similarly to Lamb, Elizabeth Barrett emphasizes her conviction that the modern stage cannot perform symbolic, poetic drama because the sensory emphasis of the stage precludes the faculty of imagination; therefore, she declared: “I shall read Otto” (3, 222-5).

Elizabeth Barrett explained to Horne that she would not sign the petition to end the licenses because theaters “at their best, take the ideal of them, & the soul of the Drama is far above the stage—& according to present and perhaps all past regulations in this country, dramatic poetry has been desecrated & drawn down into the dust of our treading” (5, 4-6). She echoes these objections to Browning in his own attempt at writing symbolic drama: “And the 'soul's tragedy,' which sounds to me like the step of a ghost of an old Drama! & you are not to think that I blaspheme the Drama, dear Mr Browning,—or that I ever thought of exhorting you to give up the 'solemn robes' and tread of the buskin. It is the modern theatre which vulgarizes these things,—the modern theatre in which we see no altar!—where the thymele is replaced by the popular caprice of the actor” (10, 101-4).

In his essay “The Past and Present State of Dramatic Art and Literature”—a copy of which Hair notes was sent to Browning—Frederick Guest Tomlins argues, along with Horne, that the degradation of drama has come about through the theaters' monopoly of the performance of intellectual drama. He asserts that unlike
Shakespeare’s time, there is not enough space and incentive for dramatists to pursue the symbolic drama in the modern age. Tomlins maintains that even the theaters that did hold the monopoly had rendered poetic drama impossible on the stage because of their empirical emphasis on scenery and costume: “The imagination is disturbed by such close approximation to facts; and it is an endless and hopeless task to endeavour to dupe the senses and the understanding by a direct appeal to them” (25). Similarly to Romantic dramatic criticism, Tomlins emphasizes the role of imagination in perceiving the drama of symbolic embodiment: “the drama, in its true existence, appeals to the imagination: it should be poetry put into action: both must be there—if not, no drama” (24), which leads him to declare that “as a species the true drama is extinct” (20). Tomlins closes his essay with an imploring message for dramatists in the hope that the symbolic drama can be revived: “To Mr. Sheridan Knowles and the dramatists—to Mr Macready and the actors, will the lovers of the intellectual drama...be able to guide all that feel an interest in the matter, to such a course as may again revive and give permanence to the National Drama of England” (30).

Although Elizabeth Barrett would not sign the petition to end the theater monopoly, she did recognize, like Tomlins, that there were writers who wished to bring the symbolic drama back upon the stage. Indeed, after reading Thomas Noon Talfourd’s *Ion*, she wrote to praise him for its poetry, which, as a keen reader of German Romantic works, she understood to mean symbolism:

Surely English voices *should* thank you for not sitting in the seat of the Utilitarians,—for providing to your countrymen, by the Greek water in your chalice, how the old Greek fountains, tho hewn out of the natural rock by unclean hands, bore waters more like in taste & colour to the pure ones of the Edenic rivers, than an English Benthamite can show in
all his cisterns of lead;—for providing that poetry has one face with

*ideal virtue*—the shadow and similitude of the virtue lost in Eden,

which visits the souls of fallen men “in thoughts from the visions of the

night (3, 170-1)

Elizabeth Barrett lauds Talfourd for his poetic power that serves to brings back “ideal

virtue” in the face of the philosophy of utilitarianism, which defines morality as

merely the result of observable causes and effects. She exclaims that in his quest for

ideal truth on the stage, Talfourd's drama looks back to the poetic drama: “So did the

Greeks! So did the ancient English—the old dramatists! (3, 170-1). It is useful to keep

Elizabeth Barrett’s praise in mind because it gives us insight into what Browning was

attempting in his plays and why it is that he dedicated *Pippa Passes* to Talfourd—a

play that I argue in chapter two is a manifesto for his symbolic dramas.

It is within this epistemological context of dramatic criticism that Browning
decided to turn his dramatic vision to the Victorian stage. Browning was already an

avid patron of the theater, attending regularly performances with John Forster,

Dickens, Talfourd, Horne and Bryan Proctor (the playwright Barry Cornwall) and

Browning was intimately involved with those poets who wished to bring symbolic

drama back upon the stage. Browning was invited to a supper in celebration of

Talfourd's *Ion* with many of these men and it was here that Macready famously

declared to him: “Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America!”

(Orr, 88). When Talfourd wished Browning well in his own dramatic endeavors

“whether he shall present those works his imagination may vivify, upon the actual

scene, to touch our hearts and senses with noble electricity, or only on that ideal stage

which all men erect in their own minds” (nt 2: 12, 324-6), he used Romantic

terminology to wish Browning success whether he decided to write for the stage,
whereby his imagination would embody into actuality the noble ideas that would touch the heart and the senses, or whether it was for the ideal stage of unacted drama that appealed through the imagination to the ineffable ideas in all of the minds of men. Writing to Macready to accept his invitation, Browning exclaimed passionately, “I will give you my whole heart and soul to the writing a Tragedy on it to be ready by the first of November next: should I be unequal to the task, the excitement and extreme effort will have their own reward:—should I succeed, my way of life will be very certain, and my name pronounced along with yours” (3, 173-4). In saying that he will give his “heart and soul” to writing drama, Browning emphasizes the epistemological nature of this future work and the fact that he was responding to the prophetic call to reform the symbolic drama, which, along with the Romantics before him, he perceived as a crucial philosophic endeavor.

Browning would go on to write both acted and closet dramas, yet his conviction that the material world is a symbolic embodiment of transcendent soul, and his emphasis on perceiving the ideal in the phenomena of the material world, led him to first set his sights on the stage. Although the stage was criticized for its tendency to privilege the senses at the expense of the imagination, it was also its proximity to reality that meant it had the potential to most fully embody the ideal. It was this philosophical understanding of the stage as a site of embodiment that appealed to Browning, and in this I agree with Lynn M. Fulton, who argues that Browning chose to go onto the stage because he was interested in the “concreteness and immediacy which Lamb dismisses as vulgar” (159-60.) Indeed, Browning turned to the theater and the objectivity of dramatic form, not to repudiate Shelley’s idealism, but to show that his poetry is its next objective expression. The foundational premise of my study is that in resituating Browning’s concept of the subjective and the objective within
idealism, it is possible to see that the objectivity of drama is not antithetical to idealism but enables the viewer to perceive soul in its material form. Indeed, Schopenhauer uses the theater as a metaphor to express how material reality is the objective representation of will and how art is a further symbolic representation that allows us to see how will is embodied in the world: “If the whole world as representation is only the visibility of the will, then art is the elucidation of this visibility, the camera obscura which shows the objects more purely, and enables us to survey and comprehend them better. It is the play within the play, the stage on the stage in Hamlet” (267). Indeed, drama has a wider epistemological significance for Browning because in representing the external machinery of manifestation it reveals the soul that is made manifest.

Yet Browning was sensitive to the Romantic argument that it was difficult to embody the ideal in the real on stage because it was likely that the “vulgar eye” would miss the spiritual import, as he observed about symbolic art in “With Francis Furini.” This idea of spiritual and empirical sight is crucial to Sordello’s move to objectivity in Sordello and to his prediction that Browning’s symbolic art will reveal the realm of soul through the romantic irony of embodiment. Browning uses the same technique that Bonaparte identifies in the fiction of the Victorians when he mirrors the dual aspect that he sees in the world through two co-existing and interpenetrating plots, the temporal plot that governs the actions and incidents of the characters in empirical reality within which is embodied the symbolic plot of ideas, and Browning emphasizes the irony inherent in romantic symbolism through a central irony in each play intended to facilitate spiritual sight in his audience/readers. Indeed the significance of epistemology for Browning’s plays is clear from the fact that he designs the interaction of his protagonists in the temporal plot by means of how they
either view the facts of the material world through the faculty of reason, which apprehends sensory information, or through the faculty of imagination and its correlative in feeling, which perceives the material as a manifestation of the ideal.

In chapter three, I discuss how Browning’s history and political tragedies *Stafford, King Victor and King Charles, A Soul’s Tragedy* and *Luria* all focus on the irony inherent in embodiment with his protagonists caught in the tragic discrepancy that exists between soul and its manifestation in moments of paradigmatic historical change. In chapter four, I discuss how love becomes a site of irony in *The Return of the Druses, A Blot in the ’Scutcheon* and *Colome’s Birthday* where different concepts of love correspond to different forms of knowledge. In chapter five, I argue that resituating Browning’s plays within the tradition of idealism also has different implications for Browning’s development of the monologue. As the objectivity of drama is the embodiment of the ideal in empirical forms, Browning bodies forth soul into space and time by situating his dramatic personas concretely in their own historical, cultural and linguistic milieus. Thus grounded in both the ideal and the real, it is the conviction of this study that the dramatic monologue is a symbolic form. I demonstrate how Browning’s arrangement of his monologues in the revised edition of *Men and Women* presents different degrees of ironic distance through the various ways in which the speakers and the paradigms of their respective time periods perceive material forms in both art and religion. Thus *Men and Women* becomes Browning’s next romantic drama and, as the Maker-See, Browning represents the different iterations of the central irony between spiritual sight and empirical sight to precipitate the same realization of soul that he had hoped to bring about in the audience/reader of his plays.

In my analysis of Browning’s romantic dramas I pay close attention to the
contemporary critical reception of his plays where some critics recognized that he was writing symbolic drama while others analyzed his work within the expectations of dramatic realism, with both perspectives raising the question of whether symbolic drama could be rendered successfully on the contemporary stage, and illuminating the problems that Browning encountered which led him to the unacted drama and the monologue form. I also explore how these contemporary reviews are echoed in much recent criticism of Browning’s plays, which has tended to see these works as realistic empirical studies rather than symbolic dramas, leading to the psychological interpretation of the dramatic monologue and the consensus that Browning’s objective dramatic poetics implies a rejection of Romantic epistemology.

The tradition in which we place Browning’s plays has important implications for Browning’s poetics especially as it pertains to the role of irony. Reading his plays as psychological studies has led to the critical assumption that Browning’s irony reflects his skepticism. Although Ryals claims that the endeavor of his study will be to examine the influence of Friedrich's Schlegel’s irony on Browning's early plays and monologues irony, since he analyzes the success and failure of the plays through the expectations of realism, it leads him to assert, like Poston and DuBois, that it is Browning's political and intellectual skepticism that is the driving force of the plays. Ryals concludes that Browning's plays ultimately fail because he was writing in the wrong genre—that of tragedy—when his ironic conception of the world meant that he should have been writing comedies instead. However, an examination of the influence of the Schlegelian distinction between the classical and the romantic reveals the relationship that Ryals has missed between August's concept of tragedy and Friedrich's theory of philosophical irony. If we look at the influence of August Schlegel's Lectures, it is apparent that rather than working in the wrong genre,
Browning is locating himself within the tradition of romantic drama. I argue that it is August Schlegel's concept of romantic drama that explains Browning's understanding of irony and how it relates to tragedy. I argue that it is through the perception of irony in romantic drama that Browning, as a romantic symbolist, hopes to facilitate a change of perception in his readers.

Megan Painter and David Shaw also see irony as a key component of Browning's dramatic form, recognizing that it provides a space to facilitate the transition from sympathy to judgment. Painter asserts that irony does not point to an empirical epistemology because the ability to perceive the discrepancy between what is and what should be in a monologue necessarily implies a shared moral universe. Similarly, Shaw maintains that Browning's monologues set up a rhetorical dialectic whereby the reader is encouraged to embrace or reject different ideas in order to find Browning's own “truths,” and thus he says that “the 'philosophy' can be understood only as the outgrowth of joint creative acts” (4). Both critics identify an epiphanic response on the part of the reader whereby we move from a historicized, relative stance to a perception of enduring truth amidst the chaos of the modern world.

Similarly to Painter and Shaw, Lee Erikson and John Woolford discuss Browning's desire to enlist the sympathetic imagination, or in Browning's own phrase the “co-operarating fancy,” of his audience in drawing their own moral conclusions rather than merely imposing his own vision upon them.

Although this reading of Browning's irony emphasizes his role as the Maker-See, it still analyzes Browning's use of irony mainly as a stylistic and rhetorical device whereas in my analysis of Browning’s objective poetics and his use of dramatic form I will focus on the relationship of realism and irony to idealism. While rhetorical irony is a key component of Browning’s plays and monologues, the full
implications for Browning’s poetics can only be seen when it is recognized as the expression of his philosophical irony. In analysing Browning’s often neglected plays, I argue that the irony of Browning’s symbolic method does not present judgment, or even a moral stance, but rather seeks to promote a deepened awareness of how the noumenal substrate of reality takes different forms in the real and exists in even the lowest material manifestation. I argue that although irony is inherent in symbolic embodiment, this does not entail relativity or skepticism for Browning; rather it is by means of this space between the ideal and its manifestation in the real, and its formal representation in the tension between the symbolic and the temporal plot in his plays and monologues, that Browning endeavors to reveal another aspect of reality, which facilitates action in the world that is based on a perception of soul.
In his Dialogue on Poetry, Friedrich Schlegel maintains that a theory of modern poetry cannot be established without recognizing the epistemological shift that took place as a result of the transition from the classical to the romantic paradigm, a transition that he sees as forming the foundation of the modern mind. In the Course of Lectures on the History of Literature, Schlegel exclaims that the separation between the classical and the romantic: “is the most remarkable intellectual contest which has ever been exhibited and determined among the human race. It forms not only the wall of partition between the two worlds—the ages of antiquity which terminated in it, and these of modern times which spring out of it; is the keystone upon which everything hangs; in the history of the development of the human intellect it is the central point from which all illumination must be derived” (67). As both Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel argue that the romantic paradigm arises from and is informed by the widespread acceptance of the Christian faith, the transition from paganism to Christianity that marks the point of separation between the classical and the romantic takes the inception of modernity back to a surprisingly early date; however, they argue in their respective lectures that it is not until the late Middle Ages that the romantic spirit manifests itself in art. Thus it is paramount for the modern poet to formulate his poetics in relation to the historical development of romantic art.

In their analyses of classical and romantic ontology, Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Schelling and Hegel after them, observe that where the classical era comprised a perfect fusion of the subjective and the objective in the
temporal world, the Christian paradigm turns inward to contemplate the
transcendence of the soul; therefore, while classical art represents the unity of the
ideal and the real, romantic poetry endeavors to reunite the infinite with the finite, or
the internal with the external, even though it can only ever be an approximation. In
the *Dialogue on Poetry*, Friedrich Schlegel makes the connection between romantic
interiority and his own modern age when he exclaims that modern subjectivity is the
culmination of the Christian self-consciousness of soul and that the next transition to
objectivity can be found in their very own era through the philosophical system of
idealism. Schlegel asserts that because idealism recognizes the subjective nature of
identity it necessarily presages its opposite—a fresh discovery of nature and a new
objectivity from which will emerge “a new and equally infinite realism.” As this new
realism will still have an ideal foundation, Schlegel says that it will “emerge as poetry
that is based on the harmony of the ideal and the real,” and therefore modern poetry
will only be different in degree and not in kind from its romantic predecessors.

This philosophical distinction between the classical and the romantic
paradigms and its importance for the interpretation of both modern intellectual history
and the progression of art is crucial to Browning's conceptualization of his own
poetry. Browning saw his own poetic development as part of a larger progressive
historical narrative, and he reveals the influence of the Schlegel brothers on his
poetics when he places the development of his poetic theory in *Sordello* within the
epistemological transition from the classical to the romantic mind. Indeed, Browning's
*Sordello*, a work that is famously known as one of the most incomprehensible poems
written in the English language, is immediately rendered far more comprehensible
when its historical foundation is understood to be symbolic. If we re-situate
Browning’s epic within the Romantic philosophy of history, it is revealed that the
crucial symbolic center of *Sordello* lies in Browning's conception of Sordello as a poet on the cusp of the new romantic paradigm. Browning situates Sordello at this symbolic point of transition, and traces his conversion from the subjective to the objective poet in order to place his own poetics in relation to Shelley’s idealism and the evolution that he sees embodied in the progressive forms of romantic art. In tracing “the incidents in the development of a soul,” Browning explores the stages of Sordello’s spiritual life as he transitions from classical totality to a unity in spirit that seeks a new objective embodiment, and with the implicit connection of the romantic paradigm to the contemporary movement of transcendental idealism, Browning mirrors Sordello’s development in his own modern poetic trajectory to show that his own poetry marks the next step in the objective expression of idealism or infinite realism that for Browning will take the form of romantic drama.

The epistemological transformation from the ancient to the romantic paradigms provided the foundation for the philosophical theories of art in the works of the Schlegel brothers, Schelling and Hegel in Germany and Coleridge and Hazlitt in Britain, among many others, but I will turn first to August Wilhelm Schlegel for an explication of this progression as his was the most well-known and popular application. In the opening segment of his *Lectures*, Schlegel describes what he sees as the essential spirit of the Greek age and how it takes a form that is opposite in temperament to its Christian counterpart. Crucially for the early classical period: “The mental culture of the Greeks was a finished education in the school of Nature” (7). As such they were “a beautiful and noble race, endowed with susceptible senses and a cheerful spirit under a mild sky, they lived and bloomed in the full health of existence; and favoured by a rare combination of circumstances, accomplished all that the finite nature of man is capable of” (7). Schlegel observes a spontaneous and
unconscious unity between form and content in their art, which reflects the natural harmony they experienced between themselves and the external world. Living in the joy of the present “human nature was all-sufficient; it was conscious of no defects, and aspired to no other higher perfection than which it could attain by the exercise of its own energies” (9).

In contrast to the Greeks who found unity and fulfillment in the natural world, Schlegel argues that the Christian belief that mankind lost its original home with God shapes the goal of their lives into a struggle to regain this lost transcendent home; yet at the same time they possess the knowledge that this endeavor will always be unfulfilled in the material world. Therefore, Schlegel says that where “the old religion of the senses sought no higher possession than outward and perishable blessings” in the Christian view “every thing finite and mortal is lost in the contemplation of infinity” (9). While the Greeks lived in a state of natural harmony, the Christian soul longs for the happiness that is promised in the next world. This leads Schlegel to conclude that “the poetry of the ancients was the poetry of enjoyment, and ours is that of desire” (9), by which he means not sexual desires but the desire for the infinite that is perceived by the individual soul. Schlegel explains that the Christian consciousness has been expanded through the loss of its transcendent home leading to an increased introspection. Thus he concludes that “the feeling of the moderns is, upon the whole, more inward, their fancy more incorporeal, and their thoughts more contemplative” (10).

Both August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel see the inward romantic spirit as arising in the Middle Ages through the influence of the Northern Teutonic tribes who converted to Christianity. In his “Epochs of Literature” in the Dialogue on Poetry, Friedrich asserts that in contrast to the Romans who merely
imitated Greek forms, in the Middle Ages “religious invention and inspiration was all the more lively: in the creation of the a new religion, in the attempts at transforming the old, in mystical philosophy must we seek the energy of that time which in this respect was great: it was a border area of culture, a fertile chaos leading to a new order of things, the true Middle Ages” (67). Infusing their ideas of heroism into the sentiments of Christianity, the chivalric ideal of the Northern conquerors no longer focused on external heroic acts as it had done before but rather upon the inward movements of the soul, and this inward emphasis was then manifested in a code of honor that dictated outward action. In his Lectures, August Wilhelm Schlegel notes that out of this vital combination arose a “new and purer spirit of love” that held woman to be the center of spirituality and the object of divine devotion (8). This new romantic spirit was first embodied in the poetry of the troubadours who mark a crucial turning point in the history of ideas.

It is precisely within this unsettled moment of transition that Browning places Sordello and his discussion of romantic poetic theory, which refers to the epistemological distinction between the classical world and Christianity and not to the artistic and philosophical movement. To explore this shifting paradigm, Browning picks the historical Sordello for his protagonist, a late twelfth century troubadour whose crucial symbolic position is derived from the fact that he is:

Born just now,

With the new century, beside the glow
And efflorescence out of barbarism;
Witness a Greek or two from the abysm
That stray through Florence-town with studious air,
Calming the chisel of that Pisan pair:
If Nicolo should carve a Christus yet!

While at Siena is Guidone set,

Forehead on hand; a painful birth must be

Matured ere Saint Eufemia's sacristy

Or transept gather fruits of one great gaze

At the moon: look you! The same orange haze,—

The same blue stripe round that—and, in the midst,

Thy spectral whiteness, Mother-maid, who didst

Pursue the dizzy painter! (1. ll. 569-83)

He is born in the unsettled border of the new age as it transitions from the classical worldview to the romantic paradigm of the Middle Ages. Sordello is not fully within either paradigm, since he is situated at the threshold of the “painful birth” of the romantic; therefore, there still may be seen occasional vestigial representatives of the classical age, as in the “Greek or two from the abysm” whose presence serves to hold back the romantic fervor that has yet to find an embodiment in the new Christian art.

According to Friedrich Schlegel “The great Dante, sacred founder and father of modern poetry, entered this path, uniting religion and poetry” (Dialogue 67), and Browning’s own epithet for Dante as the “Gate-vein of this heart's blood of Lombardy” (1. l. 346) attests that he is the figure through which the new blood of Europe will be ushered in. Although Dante’s “consummate orb” absorbed Sordello’s contribution, Browning declares that his purpose will be to “disentwine / That undercurrent 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” (2. ll. 361-65). Yet Browning does not merely want to separate Sordello from Dante but to “launch once more / That lustre” (ll. 365-6) and bring to life that incandescent, inarticulate
moment before the inward soul found its first expression in romantic art, before the “painful birth” that he sees as the precursor to his own modern poetic development.

That Sordello’s symbolic importance is derived from his position on the cusp of the romantic paradigm is also seen in his attempt to construct a new poetic language out of vulgar Latin into vernacular Italian: he “rewrought / That language, welding words into the crude / Mass from the new speech around him, till a rude / Armor was hammered out, in time to be / Approved beyond the Roman panoply / Melted to make it” (2. ll. 574-8). August Wilhelm Schlegel explains in his Lectures that the name “romantic,” given to this new spirit that arose from the fusion of Northern heroism and Christianity, is apt because it is derived from romance, which is “the name originally given to the languages which were formed from the mixture of the Latin and the old Teutonic dialects, in the same manner as modern civilization is the fruit of the heterogeneous union of the peculiarities of the northern nations and the fragments of antiquity; whereas the civilization of the ancients was much more of a piece” (5). Thus Browning focuses on Sordello’s attempt to weld a new poetic idiom from the nascent vernacular romance languages in order to symbolize the larger shift from the classical to the romantic paradigm.

In Browning’s epic, the narrative goes back to Sordello's childhood to show how his poetic development symbolically transverses the classical worldview and the birth of the modern romantic mind. In Sordello's childhood surroundings and in his early experiences, the narrator shows how Sordello is molded by, and is the last vestige of, the classical world. Architecture has symbolic significance for Browning and thus it is important that Sordello's castle is embellished with symbols of the classical age, such as carved columns of bacchanals and Caryatids. In the ornamentation of the castle the “Arab's wisdom” is everywhere to be seen, which is
an important historical detail in Browning's symbolic design because it was the Arabs who preserved the ideals of the classical period and transmitted them to Europe; therefore, they serve to mark the terminus of the influence of classical thought.

The narrator explains that Sordello has “a soul fit to receive / Delight at every sense” and that he belongs “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” (1. ll. 465-71). Endowed with a heightened perception of the beauties of the world, this class of people experience preternatural enjoyment in the corporeal forms that are apprehended by means of the senses:

You recognize at once the finer dress
Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness
At eye and ear, while round the rest is furled
(As though she would not trust them with her world)
A veil that shows a sky not near so blue,
And lets but half the sun look fervid through. (1. ll. 477-12)

In brooding on this temporal beauty, the narrator asks how it is that they can love—a question that is explained by the fact that love for Browning transcends the corporeal world so as to connect the individual with a higher power. The narrator concedes that while this worship of the temporal is “blind at first to aught / Beyond its beauty,” this “exceeding love / Becomes an aching weight; and, to remove / A curse that haunts such natures,” the classical man “invest[s] / The lifeless thing with life from their own soul” (483-91). Therefore love in the classical paradigm is expressed through the fusion of the individual soul into corporeal forms so that it lives in harmony with the external world. These continuing “fresh births of beauty wake / Fresh homage” to the
world, such that “Up and down / Runs arrowy fire, while earthly forms combine / To throb the secret forth; a touch divine— / And the scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod: / Visibly through His garden walketh God” (2. 496-504). The perfect instinctive union of the subjective soul in the external realm means that the divine is fully embodied in the natural world.

It is at this point that the narrator explains that there is another class of people who do not merely experience nature when they look upon beauty but who moreover recognize its qualities in themselves: “For there’s a class that eagerly looks, too, / On beauty, but, unlike the gentler crew, / Proclaims each new revealment born a twin / With a distinctist consciousness within / Referring still the quality, now first / Revealed, to their own soul” (1. ll. 523-8). In the compressed syntax that characterizes the poem, the narrator says that “homage, other souls direct / Without, turns inward” (ll. 535-6); in other words, it is in their experience of this subjective connection to nature that this class of people are led to a realization of a higher order that encompasses all of creation. The narrator imagines that this class of people will feel a loss now that the material world is no longer imbued with soul, but he assures them that in perceiving the beauties of the outward world as a reflection of their inward natures, they are able to experience existence more powerfully and become attuned to the divine order:

    Laugh thou at envious fate,  
    Who, from earth’s simplest combination stampt  
    With individuality—uncrampt  
    By living its faint elemental life,  
    Dost soar to heaven’s complexest essence, rife  
    With grandeurs, unaffronted to the last,
Equal to being all! (1. ll. 542-8)

Although the soul impressed with individuality is not as engaged in the temporal world, its inward depth enables them to perceive their connection to the infinite.

In his analysis of *Sordello* and German Romanticism, Ryals notes the similarity between Browning’s two types of poets and Schiller’s classification of the objective and subjective poet; however it is important to note that Schiller’s application of this distinction is not historical, which means that Ryals misses the crucial connection that Browning establishes between romantic and modern poetry and the implicit relationship that he draws between the inward Christian soul and the contemporary transition from subjective to objective idealism. That Browning’s sense of the distinction between classical and romantic being is part of a historical evolution is clear from his poem “Old Pictures in Florence” (1855) where he postures as an art critic to imagine the feelings of inadequacy experienced by the romantic, or modern mind as it looks upon the fruit of the classical age, which as the perfect fusion of soul in the temporal is expressed in art as a perfect harmony between content and form:

“The Truth of Man, as by God first spoken, / Which the actual generations garble, / Was re-uttered, and Soul (which limbs betoken) / And Limbs (Soul informs) made new in marble” (ll. 85-88). In speaking to the modern mind he addresses what he perceives as its envy for the grace that is perfectly embodied in Greek forms: “So you saw yourself as you wished you were, / As you might have been, as you cannot be” (ll. 89-90). While Browning sympathizes with the insecurities of the modern mind when it looks to art of the classical age, he tells it that:

Growth came when, looking your last on them all,

You turned your eyes inwardly one fine day

And cried with a start—What if we so small
Be greater and grander the while than they?

Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?

In both, of such lower types are we

Precisely because of our wider nature!

For time, theirs—ours, for eternity. (ll. 113-120)

In turning inward to the soul, the romantic consciousness perceives its connection to a power that transcends space and time. So while Browning concedes that the Greeks did indeed achieve perfection in their art, he explains that they were able to achieve this totality because their vision was grounded in the temporal world, whereas the art produced by the romantic mind will always appear incomplete because it is a vision that strives to embody its perceptions of the infinite realm. Thus while “Greek Art ran and reached the goal” (l. 83), modern art can only do justice to its pursuit of the ideal by approximation and therefore will always appear incomplete. Browning exclaims that he “has loved the season / Of Art's Spring-birth so dim and dewy” (ll. 178-9), which describes the time period when new art forms struggle to embody truth for their coming age. Indeed, when he proclaims that “My sculptor is Nicolo the Pisan, / My painter—who but Cimabue?” (ll. 179-80), Browning illuminates the symbolism of Sordello because Pisano is the sculptor who is invoked by the narrator when he explains that his protagonist is on the threshold of the “painful birth” that will bring forth the Christian art of the romantic age, which attests to the fact that Browning writes Sordello as a symbolic exploration of the romantic paradigm shift and its relevance for the development of his own emerging poetic forms.

Browning symbolizes the transition from the unity of the classical age to the interiority of the romantic era through a comparison of Eglamor and Sordello. At first
when Sordello wins the bardic competition against Eglamor to become Palma’s minstrel, he only offers a small refinement of an existing truth. On hearing Eglamor’s song, “Sordello’s brain / Swam; for he knew a sometime deed again; / So could supply each foolish gap and chasm / The minstrel left in his enthusiasm, / Mistaking its true version—was the tale / Not of Apollo?” (2. ll. 71-6). Yet as he begins to see more clearly the widened framework of the action — “this snatch or the other seemed to wind / Into a treasure, helped himself to find / A beauty in himself” (2. ll. 141-43) — Sordello finds that the finest concentration of beauty is found in the essence of his own soul; therefore, his self-consciousness is not a psychological interiority but rather the recognition of the transcendence of the inward soul: “So, range, free soul! —who, by self-consciousness, / The last drop of all beauty dost express— / The grace of seeing grace, a quintessence / For thee” (2. ll. 405-8). By having the poet look inward, Browning indicates that Sordello has begun his symbolic progression from the classical to the romantic poet.

The difference between these two types of mind is conveyed symbolically in the difference between Sordello and Eglamor: “Eglamor, lived Sordello’s opposite” (2. l. 195). Sordello recognizes the classical fusion of the subjective and the objective in Eglamor’s poetry. Receiving inspiration from his worship of the external, his subjective life is fused with his object of devotion, and in fixing his soul in the temporal, the truth embodied in Eglamor’s art is complete and it will always constitute his answer: “The power responded, and some sound or sight / Grew up, his own forever, to be fixed in rhyme, the beautiful, forever!—mixed with his own life” (2. 204-7). Sordello’s poetry dissolves the unity that characterizes classical art; similarly, Eglamor’s death upon losing the bardic competition to Sordello symbolizes the demise of the classical paradigm. That this distinction is a crucial point is clear
from the fact that in his interlude, Browning’s narrator also recognizes in Eglamor's song a complete fusion of his life and art: “With heart and soul and strength, for he believed / Himself achieving all to be achieved / By singer—in such songs you find alone / Completeness, judge the song and singer one, / And either purpose answered, his in it / Or its in him” (3. ll. 618-22). In contrast, he sees in Sordello's poetry a yearning that is not fully satiated by its expression in his songs, such that “a passion and a knowledge far / Transcending these, majestic as they are, / Smouldered” (3. ll. 627-629). The narrator perceives that Eglamor does not have Sordello’s romantic impulse “To note the undercurrent, the why and how, / Where, when, of the deeper life” (3. ll. 641-2)—the noumenal substrate of reality that Browning defined as soul.

In his Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics, Hegel asserts that since the romantic paradigm no longer experiences the unity of the human and divine in the material world but rather through the realm of spirit, then “It is this inner world that forms the content of the romantic, and therefore must find its representation as such inward feeling, and in the show or presentation of such feeling.” (87). Seeing everything as a reflection of his own soul, Sordello wants to express the unity that he perceives through spirit in his art. In looking to express soul, he chooses song (poetry) and not deed (the world of action) because only in poetry does he believe that he can convey the power of his will and “receive men’s sense / Of its supremacy” (2. ll. 444-5). He does not care about the song itself but only about the song’s effect, or the facilitation in his audience of a perception of the soul, which begins the distinction that Browning makes throughout the poem between men of action and men of perception, between the classical unity of being and the romantic consciousness of the infinity of the inward soul.

Seeking to express romantic interiority, Sordello takes an elemental action and
traces backward to its source in soul to find the interior motivation. Although he strives to realize the internal life of his characters in a way that the Greeks could not, Sordello perceives men and women through a spiritual lens, producing only abstracted ethereal forms. Sordello soon longs to further embody his characters, but he fears that if he follows this it will stop him “From tasting their quintessence,” which would surely frustrate “His prime design” of expressing soul (ll. 553-4). This limited vision ironically foreshadows Sordello’s later discussion of the work of Dante and Browning when he realizes that realism is the objective development of romantic subjectivity, which reveals the ideal by reproducing it in its material manifestation. Sordello asks himself whether his poetry can go “A pitch beyond this unreal pageantry / Of essences,” since “the period has ceased / For Such: present us with ourselves, at least, / Not portions of ourselves, mere loves and hates / Made flesh: wait not” (ll. 564-8). Yet Sordello is not ready or able to pioneer what Browning will show to be the future progressive iterations of romantic art.

In his endeavour to present the totality of his spiritual perception, Sordello experiences the epistemological crisis, or the “painful birth,” of the romantic paradigm: an inability to fully embody soul in the world of manifestation. What follows as a result of this inability is a series of dualities that express the space between the noumenal and the phenomenal, the imaginative perception and its embodiment in the world of cause and effect. When Sordello tries to forge a new language to express his transcendent perception—“the simultaneous and the sole”—it becomes hindered by the logical construction of language that belongs to space and time—“the successive and the many” (ll. 589-95). The narrator tells us that the totality of the classical poet has been “Sundered in twain; each spectral part at strife / With each; one jarred against another life; / The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man”
The poet accesses the noumena of dreams at night while the man is the fashioner who must give form to these perceptions, which is the work of the day. It is important to note that by the terms “out of dream” and “day’s work” (l. 685), Browning does not intend to describe the dreams of poetry as unattainable and the fashioning of poetry as attainable but rather uses common German Romantic metaphors for the side of consciousness that looks to the noumenal realm and the side of consciousness that looks to the ideal in its phenomenal existence. In trying to poetically conceptualize mankind for the expression of this inward dream, Sordello becomes increasingly imprisoned in his subjectivity. It is important to note here that Browning is not referring to psychological subjectivity but to the subjectivity of soul, which is an emphatic distinction that Browning makes earlier in the poem when he correlates the self-consciousness of the romantic paradigm with the interiority of soul:

Of Men, of that machine supplied by thought
To compass self-perception with, he sought
By forcing half himself—an insane pulse
Of a god’s blood, on a clay it could convulse,
Never transmute—on human sights and sounds,
To watch the other half with; irksome bounds
It ebbs from to its source, a fountain sealed
Forever. (3. ll. 25-32)

Browning uses the metaphor of the fountain to show that up until this point in Sordello’s spiritual development, he has seen himself as the prime agent in the world; yet when the fountain water shoots out, it only reaches the edge of the fountain’s pool: therefore, the water that is sent out in ripples can only go so far before it reaches the limit of its progress and redounds back upon itself. For Sordello, the realm of
men, or the objective world that lies outside of Sordello’s self, is only a “machine supplied by thought,” created by his mind to analyze his own soul “the other half.” In an act of solipsistic one-sided transcendentalism, the subjective soul can “convulse” in that it is able to force the material to life, but it can never “transmute” as it cannot transfer one thing to another, or make the soul real.

Sordello realizes that his own predicament is also the spiritual condition of the age: “The common sort, the crowd, / Exist, perceive; with Being are endowed, / However slight, distinct from what they See. / However bounded” (3. ll. 159-62). He sees that happiness must be to feed being (body) with perception (soul), thus turning what is alien native to the body or soul. Sordello has already turned the external native to his soul because he has perceived the objective world through his subjectivity—although the means were always imperfect to convey his perceptions: “Naught is Alien in the world— my will / Owns all already; yet can turn it still less native, since my means to correspond / With will are so unworthy” (ll. 175-7). Yet if happiness is derived from turning what is alien native to both the body or the soul, Sordello realizes that happiness would also derive from perceiving in flesh what he has seen through his spirit: “I am whole / There and demand a Palma; had the world / Been from my soul to a like distance hurled, / ’T were Happiness to make it one with me: / Whereas I must, ere I begin to Be, / Include a world, in flesh, I comprehend / In spirit now” (3, ll. 172-74). The objective has turned native to his spirit and now the spirit needs to turn native to the objective by recognizing that it already exists in the external. Sordello asks himself why he had “complained / So much my Will was fettered, yet remained / Content within a tether half the range / I could assign it?” Up until now he has only looked at the external through the internal rather than looking for the internal in the external.
Sordello remembers Naddo’s assertion that the work of the minstrel is to behold mankind, but up until now he has only studied mankind as a manifestation of his own soul rather than seeking to find soul as it already exists within mankind. Looking again upon humanity, Sordello muses to himself that: “Already you include the multitude,” realizing that the world is already native to his self because he has perceived the external through his own soul; therefore, he recognizes that the next step must be to “let the multitude / Include yourself; and the result were new: / Themselves before, the multitude turn you” (5. ll. 533-36). Externals can indeed satisfy his soul if he seeks to find in everyone else the soul he first saw in himself; this would be to find unity in the external and to make the subjective turn objective.

In turning to mankind as the body (or expression of) his soul, Sordello experiences an increasing awareness of social inequality that leads him to recognize the plight of the people who then inspire his desire to become a man of action. Recognizing that both divided sides are intent on making Rome Guelf or Ghibilline, and after having heard a song that hearkens back to the glories of Rome, Sordello has the momentary epiphany that “Rome typifies the scheme to put mankind / Once more in full possession of their rights,” leading him to propose a return to the past: “Let us have Rome again! On me it lights / To build up Rome—on me, the first and last: / For such a Future was endured the Past” (4. ll. 1023-27). However, in seeking to reform the present through a revival of the classical mind and aesthetic—the archetype of a passing paradigm—Sordello soon perceives the disappointing discrepancy between the perfection of Rome and what he sees as the degradation of his own age.

An inner voice that Sordello hears illuminates the significance of an organic, symbolic view of history for understanding the role of the poet in relation to the man of action. Sordello must first embrace the concept of history that views the forms of
each epoch as the manifestation of God's truths for each particular age before he can establish his role: he must recognize that the absolute embodies itself forth in the external world and not just through his own soul. The voice outlines a teleological and historical embodiment of spirit, which relates to Browning’s notion of the three souls: Charlemagne as the Holy Roman Emperor exhibits strength in power, which the first soul of “what does;” Hildebrand (later Pope Saint Gregory VII), who made the Empire dependent on the Church, matches feeling with strength to produce knowledge, which is Browning’s second soul of “what knows,” and with this progression comes an increasing democratic spirit as the league against Frederick seeks to check autocratic power in the general interest of Italy; the third step is taken by St Francis, who declared love to be the essence of Christianity, dedicating his life to helping the common people of Italy, which is the third soul of “what is” that transforms through love the two lower souls so that they are connected to the ideal. Thus Browning sees the Truce of God, where fighting was suspended during mass and on religious festivals, as the gradual evolution of action that is based on the increasing perception of soul that underlies material reality.

Acknowledging his place in this historical progression, Sordello comes to the conclusion that if the Gibellines, who support Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor, represent power that is separate from soul, then the Guelfs, who support the Pope, would best serve the interests of the people; therefore, he decides that his definitive action should be to convince Taurello to support the Guelf cause. The interaction between Taurello and Sordello is yet another symbolic exploration of the transition from the classical to the romantic mind with Taurello as the last flowering of the classical hero, just as Eglamor is the last vestige of the classical bard. As a warrior-hero, Taurello enacts art and war through his doings rather than passively
reflecting upon them; thus he sees himself as immersed in a cyclic pattern of vacillating fortunes and conquests rather than as part of a teleological process of progressive improvement. Taurello dismisses the notion of taking advice from a poet, which prompts Sordello to consider whether the poet really has a role that could influence men of action in the world.

Sordello maintains that “I, with my words, hailed brother of the train / Deeds once sufficed” was indeed a man of action like Taurello albeit only in the realm of word, and now that these actions no longer embody soul, he asks himself “Who fails, through deeds howe’er diverse, retrack / My purpose still. My task?” (5. ll. 548-51). No longer can Sordello imitate these fixed forms, but rather he must seek to express the inward essence of soul that he finds in himself and within the world: “Those forms, unalterable first as last, / Proved him her copier, not the proplast / Of nature” (ll. 525-27). Consequently, Sordello realizes that he needs a new mythology to express the connection between soul and act that was once a unified whole, and he utilizes a metaphor derived from Greek mythological cosmology to show this transition from classical to romantic symbolism: Chaos, now the primordial essence of world-soul, is fashioned anew with each successive god, forming symbols that are “like a pact / And protest against Chaos, some first fact / I’ the faint of time” (ll. 555-57). Although these new romantic symbols agree to body forth essence, at the same time it is the very nature of symbolic embodiment to constrict the divine source: as Sordello notes, “My deep of life, I know, / Is unavailing to show” (ll. 557-8).

There is a striking correlation here between Browning and Friedrich Schlegel, who proclaimed in his “Talk on Mythology” that to recreate the unity of the classical world, the modern poet (as the romantic poet did before him) needs a new mythology that will unify the subjective soul with the external world. Bonaparte explains how
mythology for the German Romantics was not viewed empirically as a psychological or anthropological expression of comparative cultures, but rather as a language for the ineffable. The importance of mythology for Schlegel is that it comprises a symbolic language wherein we can discern the relationship between the ideal and the real:

“What usually escapes our consciousness can here be perceived and held fast through the senses and spirit like the soul in the body surrounding it, through which it shines into our eye and speaks to our ear” (85), and he uses the very same metaphor as Browning to depict this purpose: “For this is the beginning of all poetry, to cancel the progression and laws of rationally thinking reason, and to transplant us once again into the beautiful confusion of the imagination, into the original chaos of human nature, for which I know as yet no more beautiful symbol than the motley throng of the ancient gods” (86). Behler explains that for Schlegel chaos does not have a pejorative meaning but rather means the “primordial fusion of the original elements of the world” (11), which denotes the divine substrate of the noumenal world-soul.

This correlation between symbolism and mythology can also be seen in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, where the often skeptical narrator-editor shapes and explicates the dense transcendental idealism of Herr Teufelsdröckh for the spiritual edification of what Carlyle perceives to be a more empirically minded English audience. For Carlyle the symbol is the way in which the divine essence of the world is bodied forth in the phenomenal, and his idealist philosopher, Teufelsdröckh, implores the reader to consider that if the myths of the Christian religion are no longer a viable manifestation of the ideal: “what next? Wilt thou help us to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live?” (147). Similarly to Schlegel and Browning, Carlyle uses the metaphor of Chaos and the fashioning of form to express
this new symbolic embodiment. Referring to biblical chaos and creation, Carlyle argues that to recognize and produce the ideal in the actual is analogous to the work of God, which means that, “instead of a dark wasteful chaos, we have a blooming, fertile, heaven encompassed world” (149).

Schlegel reminds the reader that the new symbolism will be forged from within and not by means of the intuitive fusion of the spiritual and the sensuous as it was for the classical world, and Browning makes this same distinction when he tells the classicizing Gerard de Lairesse that although the perfect mythical fusion between the senses and the soul no longer exists: “Oh, we can fancy too! But somehow fact / Has got to—say, not so much push aside / Fancy, as to declare its place supplied / By fact unseen but no less fact the same, / Which mind bids sense accept” (ll. 149-53). Browning explains that for the moderns, fact (the objective world and body) is supplied by fancy, which means that it is endowed and formed from the ideal, the existence of which for Browning is itself fact.

Sordello expresses this distinction between classical and romantic symbolism as: “Deeds in their due gradation till Song dawned” (5. l. 560). What Browning means here can be explained again by the affinity that he found between himself and Schopenhauer who argued that music is the most immediate expression of the noumenal will, which Browning likened to his own concept of soul. As the spiritual condition of the age is the desire to body forth the self-consciousness of soul in the outer world — “All in degree, no way diverse in kind / From minds about it, minds which, more or less, / Lofty or low, move seeking to impress /Themselves on somewhat” (ll. 562-5) — the romantic artist represents the “fullest effluence of this collective mind” (l. 561). In the romantic paradigm, thoughts are acts of the mind in the same way that deeds are acts of the body in the classical world; therefore, thought
is now informed by soul in the same way that deeds were once informed by the soul.

Sordello traces this transition from the classical embodiment to romantic self-consciousness:

Thought is the soul of act, and, stage by stage,  
Soul from body still to disengage  
As tending to a freedom which rejects  
Such help and incorporeally affects  
The world, producing deeds, but not by deeds,  
Swaying, in others, frames itself exceeds,  
Assigning them the simpler tasks it used  
To patiently perform till Song produced  
Acts, by thoughts only, for the mind (ll. 567-5)

The soul disengages from the body, “tending to a freedom,” thereby rejecting help from the body so that it becomes itself the source of inspiration. The soul separates from body so that the soul is no longer embodied in the action but precedes it; therefore “producing deeds, but not by deeds.” Although these actions come from the inward spirit, they act and affect people in the real world—“swaying in others.” Thus the soul gives thought the same task of symbolic embodiment that existed in classical action, but as thought derives from beyond the temporal it can never be fully bodied forth the same way that soul is embodied in the great symbolic deeds of the Greek world—the “frames itself exceeds.” Yet the transcendental framework of Browning’s symbolism is clear: as soul precedes thought, to “divest / Mind of e'en Thought, and, lo, God's unexpressed / Will dawns above us!”—the noumenal substrate from which the soul arises, and Sordello proclaims that “All then is to win / Save that” (ll. 575-8).

Sordello recognizes that “my art intends new structure from the ancient” (5. ll.
642-3) and that the new symbolism can only ever be an approximation: “he must stoop contented to express / No tithe of what’s to say—the vehicle / Never sufficient” (5. ll. 652-4). August Wilhelm Schlegel makes this same distinction between classical and romantic symbolism in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* when he discerns that “In Grecian art and poetry we find an original and unconscious unity of form and matter; in the modern…we observe a keen struggle to unite the two, as being naturally in opposition to each other.” Schlegel explains that while “the Grecian executed what it proposed in the utmost perfection” the modern “can only do justice to its endeavours after what is infinite by approximation; and, from a certain appearance of imperfection, is in greater danger of not being appreciated” (10), which is the very same argument that Browning makes in his “Old Pictures in Florence.” Schlegel discerns that it is precisely because of this tension between the infinite and the finite in the romantic paradigm that the romantic artist strives “to reconcile these two worlds between which we find ourselves divided, and to blend them indissolubly together. The impressions of the senses are to be hallowed, as it were, by a mysterious connexion with higher feelings; and the soul, on the other hand, embodies its forebodings, or indescribable intuitions of infinity, in types and symbols borrowed from the visible world” (10).

Browning shows in “Gerard de Lairesse” and in *Sordello* that his call for a new symbolism, similar to those of Schlegel and Carlyle, is based on his conviction that the objective world is fashioned from the ideal realm. This foundational premise has important implications for the way in which Browning uses Sordello’s progress to explore his own relationship with Shelley’s philosophical idealism. Again the broader influence of the Schlegel brothers is significant here in that Friedrich Schlegel’s discussion of the relationship between romantic subjectivity, modern poetry and the
contemporary movement of idealism illuminates the crucial analogy that Browning makes between Sordello’s transition from the subjective to the objective poet and his own transition from subjective idealism to objective idealism.

Schlegel sees Fichte’s subjective idealism as a culmination of the inward romantic mind, a point that is corroborated structurally by the fact that he places his discussion of idealism and modern poetry directly after his “Epochs of Literature,” which is an exploration of the transition of the classical to romantic art. Observing that idealism originates from internal reflection by the same process as the romantic spirit, Schlegel asserts that: “Just as it is the nature of spirit to determine itself and in perennial alternation to expand and return to itself, and as every thought is nothing but the result of such an activity; so is the same process generally discernible in every form of idealism, which itself is but the recognition of this law” (83). Sordello’s first symbolic transition from classical externalization to the interiority of the romantic soul mirrors the inward trajectory of subjective idealism wherein the transcendent is no longer found in the material world but is rather found in man’s own self, and Sordello’s recognition that mankind existed for him only as it was supplied by thought for self-perception reflects how for the first phase of idealism the objective world is a concept of the mind, or a limitation of the infinite ego, which acts as a vehicle for self-analysis and spiritual and moral growth.

For Schlegel, the subjectivism of Fichte’s philosophy can also be seen in the self-consciousness of the modern poet: the modern poet is always aware of the ironic disparity between his desire to embody the infinite and the impossibility of its complete realization, the enthusiasm of divine inspiration (his self-creation) and his skeptical inability to completely communicate these intuitions (his self-destruction). Browning makes the connection between Sordello’s subjectivity and the self-
consciousness of his narrator, whom Martens rightly sees as representing an earlier stage of Browning’s own modern poetic development. Indeed, the meta-narrator reveals his complete subjectivity by transcending the boundaries of objectivity to reflect upon the very act of shaping his work. Schlegel recognizes this aspect of the subjective modern poet in the wit of earlier romantic poetry, particularly in the metafictional persona of Cervantes, whose *Arabesque* is an “artfully ordered confusion,” “charming symmetry of contradictions” and a “wonderfully perennial alternation of enthusiasm and irony” that “seem to me an indirect mythology themselves” (86). In the explanatory title that Browning included in 1863, he entitled the first book a “Quixotic attempt” to highlight the parallel that Browning makes between Sordello’s early romantic subjectivity and the predicament of the modern poet, which he represents in the early narrative voice.

Ryals analyzes the relationship between the *parabasis* of Browning’s narrator, German idealism and Schegel’s concept of irony, but he does not observe how Sordello’s own transition from subjectivity to objectivity equally implies the turn from subjective idealism to objective idealism on the part of the modern poet, from the self-expression of the subjective poet to the symbolism of the objective poet. Indeed, Schlegel argues that the culmination of subjective idealism necessitates a renewed emphasis on nature and objectivity, presaging that: “There will “arise from the matrix of idealism a new and equally infinite realism, and idealism will not only by analogy of its genesis be an example of the new mythology, but it will indirectly become its very source” (83–4). Schlegel makes the same argument as Browning in “Gerard de Lairesse” when he asserts that the new mythology must be derived from the real but with the recognition that this, in turn, is itself an embodiment of the ideal; therefore, “this new realism, since it must be of idealistic origin and must hover as it
were over an idealistic ground, will emerge as poetry which indeed is to be based on the harmony of the ideal and the real (84). Schlegel sees this movement of idealism in Schelling’s symbolic view of nature, which places its emphasis on the objective as the manifestation of the absolute. Indeed, this recognition that the subjective divine mind also evolves in the objective material world is the very realization that Sordello comes to when he perceives the soul he found in himself to also reside in mankind and in the progress of history as well.

In discussing the two phases on idealism, from the subjective to the objective, Schlegel uses Spinoza as an example of the new infinite realism because his imagination and feeling enabled him to see the objective world as a symbol of the divine, from which “you are granted a profound view into the innermost workshop of poetry” (85). Schlegel makes it clear that this new mythology cannot be produced by systematic philosophy but only in poetry where the imagination seizes the transcendent meaning of reality; therefore, he has only used Spinoza as an example of how mysticism relates to poetry. Indeed, Ludovico, who is the speaker of each segment of Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry*, explains in conversation with Antonio that “I said myself in the talk that I brought in Spinoza only as a representative. Had I wanted to deal with it more extensively, I would also have talked about the great Jakob Böhme” (91). It is interesting for an analysis of Browning and idealism that Schlegel refers to Boehme here as it is to this German mystic that Browning turns in “Transcendentalism in Twelve Books” (1855), which he placed first in his revised edition of *Men and Women*, to reveal the importance of idealism to his realism and to the development of his concept of romantic drama.

Speaking to a fellow poet, Browning calls for song rather than thought in poetry: “Song’s our art: / Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts / Instead
of draping them in sights and sounds” (ll. 2-4). In calling for song, Browning does not mean to suggest lyrical poetry but rather conveys his conviction that music is the expression of the transcendent, and as such he uses it here to symbolize the faculty of imagination in contrast to the conceptual prose of philosophy that belongs to the world of cause and effect. Carlyle elucidates this idea in his Lectures on Hero-Worship, lectures that Browning attended, when he refers to the German idealist view that “the poet has an infinitude in him; communicates an Unendlichkeit, a certain character of ‘infinitude,’ to whatsoever he delineates” (53). Carlyle maintains that song is “musical thought,” which does not refer to lyrical poetry but to the poet “who thinks in that manner” (54). For Carlyle, as it is for Browning, song is “the Heroic of Speech” (55) because the poet who thinks musically sees into the noumenal essence of reality: it is the “seeing eye” of the poet who “discloses the inner harmony of things; what Nature meant, what musical idea nature has wrapped up in these often rough embodiments” (67). Yet Browning asserts that the inner musical essence of the real world can only be conveyed in symbolism: in declaring that the poet should suffuse his poetry with “sights and sounds,” he echoes Schlegel’s exclamation that through sight and sound mythology, or symbolism, reveals the divine to the senses and the soul.

For Browning the true transcendentalism is not Boehme’s difficult conceptual prose—the systematic thought of his philosophy—but his early intimation that the material world is a symbol of the infinite, and he compares Boehme’s prose to the magic of John of Halberstadt to show that in conjuring up and recreating the concrete world of phenomena, John’s magic leads to a perception of the spiritual within it. It is important to note that Browning does not see himself as a mage or a pantheistic philosopher—the type of prophet that he criticized in the narrative interlude—but like
Schlegel uses them as representative examples of the symbolic method. Indeed, Browning asserts in “Transcendentalism” that the central question to be answered by idealism as it is expressed in poetry is the meaning of the objective: “Objects throng our youth, ’t is true; / We see and hear and do not wonder much: / If you could tell us what they mean, indeed!” (19-21).

As Browning’s desire for song is not mirrored in the prosaic form of his dramatic utterance, Martens contends that Browning separates himself from the poet-seer’s vision and the transcendent truths that the subjective poet seeks, but I would argue that in the dramatic form of the poem and by asking “May a brother speak?” at the same time as he calls for song (l.1), Browning emphasizes his conviction that we can only know music, or the ideal, in its objective realization—that to recreate the ideal in its adulterated phenomenal form will be the infinite realism of his symbolism.

We can see Browning’s increasing objectivism in Sordello as Sordello’s transition from the subjective to the objective poet is mirrored in the transition from the subjective idealism of the self-conscious narrator to Browning, the author of Sordello, who is heralded by his protagonist as the next step of realism in the idealism of romantic poetry. This change is first traced in the narrator’s interlude when he interrupts the story to signal the evolution of his poetics. In making the distinction between the classical totality of Eglamor and the romantic interiority of Sordello, the narrator reveals that as the inheritor of romantic subjectivity, he too is thwarted by the ironic space between his enthusiasm and his inability to communicate this enthusiasm in his art. Wondering whether he should continue with his poem, the narrator sees a group of market girls who lead him to the realization that he now only asks for this same kind of health and opportunity for the rest of mankind, not the physical and spiritual perfection that Shelley had once called for. The narrator wants to see
Shelley’s ideal forms in their embodiment and Browning uses the image of Venice as “a type / Of Life” to express this recognition: “’twixt blue and blue extends, a stripe, / As Life, the somewhat, hangs ’twixt naught and naught / ’T is Venice, and ’t is Life” (3. ll. 723-5). Venice, as a strip of physical land between sky and water, reveals that the material is girded by the infinite; it lies between naught and naught because zero and infinity are metaphysically equitable terms. As Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh says: “Nay, unless my Algebra deceive me. Unity itself divided by zero will give Infinity” (145). The narrator, and by implication Browning, will now find his symbolism in embodiment. Irony lies in this space between the ideal and the real, but it is the irony of the material world rather than the subjective irony of the solipsistic poet.

This leads to a change in the narrator’s muse, or his mythological source of inspiration, which up until the present moment of digression has figured as a goddess but now transforms into a bedraggled beggar girl, reaffirming that the new mythology for romantic poetry will be found in the real world. The role of the objective poet will be to reveal the relationship between the ideal and the real; thus, the narrator will be like Moses who struck the rock at Meribah to show the Israelites an act of God in the world. In relinquishing the Promised Land, Browning refers to the second narrative of this action that is recounted in Numbers 20: 10-13 wherein Moses goes against God’s order to speak to the rock, striking it instead. The key here for Browning is that in the second narrative, which will indeed inform the second part of his own narrative, Moses first turns to speak with the crowd before revealing the divine, thereby relinquishing his position as the mouthpiece of God, the prophet, to turn to mankind as the poet. This new trajectory symbolizes Browning’s decision that the symbols for his poetry will not be derived from the internal, divine space of the subjective soul but from the objective manifestation of real life, and he will strike it “awkwardly” since
the new symbolism can only be an approximation of the divine. Satan will “claim his carcass” in that he will be at a remove from God, but it is precisely within this ironic space between the ideal and the real that he will “Figure as a Metaphysic Poet” (3. l. 829).

With his new role in mind, the narrator outlines three types of objective poets: the worst kind of poet who merely says that they have seen, the next best kind of poet who describes what they saw, and the highest kind of poet who “Impart[s] the gift of seeing to the rest” (3. l. 868). What Browning means here by the gift of seeing is explicated through his subsequent comparison of the classical man of action and the romantic man of insight, which as Browning has shown throughout his epic poem is an ontological and epistemological distinction. The narrator’s transition to the objective poet mirrors Sordello’s own desire to help mankind act in the real world upon a perception of soul rather than merely using them as a vehicle for his own self-conception. The narrator concedes that he can understand why people prefer men of action like Taurello, who see little but turn what little they see to account in the world, over men of insight like Sordello; they make the assumption that because the man of insight does not act much in the world, the ideal realm is equally unable to affect the material realm. Yet the narrator maintains that the world should keep the “Makers-see” on the alert because through their own perception of soul they may indeed help others act upon a perception of the ideal. Thus Browning and the narrator of the first half of Sordello move closer together as the narrator, like Sordello, moves from the potential solipsistic irony of the subjective poet to the productive irony of the objective poet; this explains why the voice of the narrator recedes after his reflective interlude. Browning and the narrator will no longer use the figure of Sordello as a mirror of his own modern predicament but as a symbol to reveal the relationship
between seeing and being, soul and body, which without the guidance of the narrator will require the “cooperating fancy” of the reader: “And therefore have I moulded, made anew / A Man, and give him to be turned and tried, / Be angry at or pleased at” (3. ll. 934-6).

The narrator concludes that the best form for showing the relationship between soul and act, the noumenal and the phenomenal, will be the dramatic mode. Here the self-consciousness of the narrator necessarily recedes and, more importantly, comes to represent the world of external embodiment: as Browning says in the Essay on Shelley, “whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain” (my italics; 281). In the dramatic works that follow Sordello, Browning reverses the interior form of Paracelsus, which discarded with the external machinery of persons and events to trace the movements of the soul, to reinstate the objective framework of space and time wherein the soul is made manifest.

The correlation between Sordello’s development from the subjective to the objective poet and the narrator’s transition from Browning’s representation of his early poetic development to his current stance of infinite realism is made clear when Sordello foresees Browning’s own work as part of the historical progression of romantic poetry. After Sordello has realized that he needs to find fresh forms to embody soul, he declares that the new symbolism for the romantic poet will be derived from “Life’s elemental masque” (5. l. 584), or the empirical reality that is the semblance of the inner meaning of the world, and his first person pronoun becomes the universal “I” as he traces the progression of romantic poetry.

Sordello at first sees the next movement of romantic poetry in the work of Dante who, perceiving the world through the inward spirit, represents his souls in
abstract form as either sinners or saints. Moving ahead to a later age, Sordello presages Browning’s work as the next stage of romantic idealism that will be more objective; therefore, he will delineate these abstractions of good and evil, light and shadow, in their material embodiments; yet Sordello acknowledges that they are still supplied by the ideal in that they are refractions from the divine white light. Sordello explains that this next poet will put Dante’s abstract forms in situations that “conduct / Each nature to its farthest, or obstruct / at soonest, in the world” (5. ll. 603-5). Placing Dante’s essences in the real world, in the same way that the narrator finds Shelley’s ideal humanity in the embodied imperfections of mankind, the objective poet will “disengage / Their forms, love, hate, hope, fear, peace make, war wage, / In presence of you all! (ll. 609-10). In seeing both the ideal and the real, Browning will reveal the space between them as a means to “unveil the last of mysteries,” if not to the world then at least to a few, and “Man’s inmost life shall have yet freer play” (ll. 616-17). Thus Sordello discerns that the next objective poet will actually “cast external things away, / And nature’s composite, so decompose” (l. 619). It is at this point that Browning the over-poet interjects himself into the text to exclaim: “Why, he writes Sordello!” (l. 620), powerfully demonstrating that, as the next objective iteration of romantic poetry, Browning himself will be the Maker-See—the symbolist who reveals the relationship between soul and its embodiment.

Browning enacts this revelation throughout the denouement of his epic poem. As the Maker-See who reveals the gap between soul and embodiment, Browning puts Sordello in a situation that serves to reveal his inward life: when Sordello finds out that he is Taurello’s son, his father cedes control over the city and its future by giving him the imperial badge. Yet as a man of insight and not of action—the two not having yet been reconciled—when he is faced with the potential of action Sordello is unable
to accept only the partial realization of his soul. Utterly overcome by his metaphysical crisis, the next morning Taurello and Palma find the bard dead. In his discussion of romantic drama August Schlegel finds a correlation between romantic irony and tragedy, which he sees as deriving from the ironic space between the eternal and the relative. Indeed, Sordello’s tragedy lies in the discrepancy that he perceives between his infinity and his finity, or between his soul and his body. The narrator also experienced this irony in his early attempt to shape his work; however, he does not show Sordello’s final failure in order to mirror his own modern self-consciousness, but rather as a way to facilitate in his reader a perception of the real and the ideal and of his own part in the progress of mankind in the historical embodiment of soul.

Browning presents the dialectic between Dante and his own poetry as the progress of romantic idealism, but it also functions as a subtle parallel of the dialectic between Browning and Shelley, one of the literary ghosts to whom the poem is addressed. Michael G. Yetman argues that Sordello is a symbolic exorcism of Shelley’s Romantic poetics, and the critical consensus has been that in turning to objective poetry, Browning rejects Shelley’s philosophical idealism and Romantic epistemology. However, I would argue that in placing his poetics within the symbolic transition from the classical to the romantic mind, Browning does not conceive of his poetic development as distinct from Shelley’s philosophical idealism and the subjective poet but rather as its next objective iteration, which is the recognition and representation of soul through its imperfect material expression. As part of the progression of romantic poetry, Browning sees the distinction between himself and Shelley as one of degree rather than kind. Martens argues that although Browning turns away from philosophical idealism he retains Shelley’s humanitarianism and republicanism, and while this is true, I would add that even Browning’s politics arise
from the recognition, as Sordello himself realizes, that soul exists in humanity and is embodied in the empirical history of mankind—a point to which I will return in the discussion of Browning’s history plays.

The fact that Browning found a correlation between the romantic paradigm, philosophical idealism and his relationship to Shelley can be discerned even in his first published poem, *Pauline* (1833). When the poet-narrator reflects upon his first discovery of the intensity of his own soul, in other words the romantic predicament, he relays his search in the history of thought for a correlative to the spiritual and creative expansion of this potentiality: “I dreamed not of restraint, but gazed / On all things: schemes and systems went and came, / And I was proud (being vainest of the weak) / In wandering o’er thought’s world to seek some one / To be my prize, as if you wandered o’er / The White Way for a star” (ll. 398-403). Yet the poet-narrator asserts that “my choice fell / Not so much on a system as a man” (ll. 403-4), which suggests that Browning found the fullest iteration of idealism, as the modern correlation of romantic interiority, not in a systematic philosophy but in the poetry of Shelley, which is the same point that he makes in “Transcendentalism.”

In the *Essay on Shelley*, Browning defines Shelley as the archetypal “subjective poet, of the modern classification,” referring, as Elizabeth Barrett noted, to the well-known German usage of the term. That this is a continuation of the romantic paradigm is clear from the fact that Browning felt that if Shelley had not died young he would have come to have seen himself as a Christian poet, which Browning means in a spiritual rather than theological sense—a distinction that Carlyle commended upon reading Browning’s *Essay*. Browning asserts that, similarly to Dante, Shelley saw the external through his subjective soul, which as a reflection of the absolute mind led to abstraction: he perceived in “the universe, nature and man,
their actual state of perfection in imperfection” (288-9). Looking higher than any manifestation of both beauty and good in the real, Shelley was not willing to accept “the manifold partial developments of beauty and good on every side,” leaving “them the ultimates he found them” (289). It is Shelley’s vision of the abstract ideal forms that leads Browning to pronounce that Shelley was “moved by and suffused with a music at once of the soul and the sense” (p. 289). Indeed all of his poetry is a mythology: “a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal” (299).

The mature narrator of Pauline explains how he lived in the realm of the noumenal with Shelley, whose idealism set him the task: “To disentangle, gather sense from song; / Since, song-inwoven, lurked there words which seemed / A key to a new world, the muttering / Of angels, something yet unguessed by man” (ll. 413-416). He describes to his lover how, “I was full of bliss, who lived / With Plato and who had the key to life” (ll. 435-6). Yet to “gather sense from song,” the young poet felt the urge to find the ideal perceptions of Shelley’s soul in their material embodiments: “’T was in my plan to look on real life, / The life all new to me; my theories / Were firm, so I left, to look and learn” (ll. 441-3). However, when the aspiring poet realized that the ideal forms could never fully exist in the real, he recounts how it led to his disillusion and despair. Nevertheless even in this despair his idealism persists, such that when he does look upon the real it is still through the potentiality and self-consciousness of his soul and “So, my baffled hope / Seeks out abstractions” (ll. 607-8).

The narrator details his decision to “look within no more,” telling Pauline that “I aim not even to catch a tone / Of harmonies he [Shelley] called profusely up” (ll.
Nevertheless, Shelley's music can still be heard: “A melody some wondrous singer sings, / Which, though it haunt men oft in the still eve, / They dream not to essay; yet it no less / But more is honored” (ll. 222-225). He has not renounced his idol; rather, Shelley’s song remains the lasting call of the soul—the mysterious and transcendent inner reality of the world. The narrator explains that he now recognizes that this yearning of soul is itself a yearning for God, but it will take seven years of working on *Sordello*, as the exploration of the historical evolution of the romantic soul emerging out of Christianity, for Browning to affirm his ideal realism and to define his relationship with Shelley.

In *Sordello* and in the *Essay on Shelley*, Browning shows his pioneering of objectivity does not constitute a Bloomian rejection of his romantic and Romantic predecessor; the mature poet and his youthful idol are not diametric opposites but are part of the historical dialectic between the subjective and the objective poet, or between soul and its manifestation:

> If the subjective might seem to be the ultimate requirement of every age, the objective, in the strictest sense, must still retain its original value. For it is with world as a starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilized, but the raw material that it operates upon must remain (285).

Both the subjective and the objective operate on the conviction that the material world is an embodiment of the ideal. Indeed, although the inward contemplation of the subjective continually deepens its spiritual insight, Browning maintains that the empirical forms through which soul knows itself must always be retained, and that these material manifestations must be “reverted to and relearned” because the
progression of the inner spiritual must always body itself forth in new forms.

In the explanatory titles of 1863 that accompany Sordello’s survey of the idealism of romantic poetry from its subjective to its objective form, Browning surveys the progression of symbolic embodiment from Greek totality to romantic synthesis: from the “epoist” to the “dramatist, or, so to call him, analyst who turns in due course synthetist.” The epic poet expressed the classical world where “deeds once sufficed” and where action is itself is symbolic and is both the means and the end; by contrast the dramatist, or analyst, exemplified by Dante, has an awareness of the soul that informs human action but he separates this entity into its constituent parts of the ideal and the real; the final phase is the “synthetist” poet, the future Browning, who will show soul in its embodiment in the real, recombining the separated constituent elements into a approximate reunified whole.

Browning identifies himself as the romantic symbolist, or “synthetist” poet, in his next collection of poetry, Bells and Pomegranates, the series of pamphlets wherein he published the plays and monologues that he had worked on while he was writing and revising Sordello. Indeed, Browning’s debt to the idea of romantic symbolism in his next objective, dramatic poetry, can be seen in the title that he gave to the series. The deep import of Browning’s symbolic title has been overlooked in criticism of the poet's early work, but his explanation of its meaning, at the instigation of Elizabeth Barrett, reveals his relationship to the Schlegel brothers and the importance of Sordello for Browning in developing a symbolic language that would enable him to discuss the role of poetry throughout his work. He writes at the end of the last series of Bells and Pomegranates:

I take the opportunity of explaining, in reply to inquiries, that I only meant by that title to indicate an endeavour towards something like an
alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought; which looks ambitious, thus expressed, so the symbol was preferred. (viii)

Viewing this title in the context of the symbolic language that Browning develops in *Sordello*, it becomes apparent that this title is a condensed juxtaposition of symbols for the ideal (music, sound, and poetry) and symbols for the material (speech, sense and thought); that which looks inward to the noumenal realm and that which looks to its outward manifestation in the phenomenal. Indeed in *Sordello*, Browning uses music and sound to delineate the transcendent realm of soul, and by “poetry” he does not simply mean verse but along with Shelley refers to the expression of an eternal truth accessed by the faculty of imagination. Browning juxtaposes these symbols of the ideal with symbols that speak for empirical reality: in *Sordello*, Browning shows that in contrast to the totality of perception, “discoursing,” or language, is conceptual and belongs to space and time and that “thought” is the act or embodiment of soul in the mind. Finally with “sense” he speaks of the phenomena that comprise the material world of manifestation. When Browning explains that his title signifies his endeavour towards a “mixture” of these symbols, he declares his role as the poet who strives to bring the ideal and the real together by showing the ideal in its manifestation, and by the “alternation” of these symbols he denotes the inevitable ironic gap that exists between the ideal and the real.

*Bells and Pomegranates* is a significant work in the evolution of Browning’s new romantic symbolism, and he placed *Pippa Passes*, which was conceived by Browning as he traveled in Northern Italy seeking inspiration for his work on epic, at the opening of his first collection of 1841 as a symbolic enactment of the poetics that he set forth in *Sordello*. That *Pippa Passes* looks back to the poetic theory that he
consolidated in *Sordello* is clear from the scene featuring Jules and Phene, which connects the play overtly with classical and romantic aesthetics that he explored in the former work. When foreign art students in Asolo trick Jules, a fellow art student whose pretensions they abhor, by sending counterfeit letters from a young Greek girl, Phene, their machinations bring about a crucial revelation in Jules concerning his art. On seeing Phene and reading the letters that he thinks she has written, Jules believes that he has found the very ideal that animates his work in her beauty, and upon this realization he quickly proclaims his love and asks her to be his wife. When they speak for the very first time in person after their wedding, Jules explains to Phene that before he beheld her in the flesh, he had accustomed himself:

> To see, throughout all nature, varied stuff
> For better nature's birth by means of art:
> With me, each substance tended to one form
> Of beauty—to the human Archetype.
> On every side occurred suggestive germs
> Of that—the tree, the flower—or, take the fruit,—
> Some rosy shape, continuing the peach,
> Curved beewise o'er its bough; as rosy limbs,
> Depending, nestled in the leaves; and just
> From a cleft rose-peach the whole Dryad sprung! (2. ll. 82-92)

Jules' explanation of his inspiration is clearly the Schlegelian conception of classical art that Browning explored in *Sordello*: he manifests spirit in the external world so that he may worship the beauty of the human form, and now that Jules has found his Greek ideal in Phene he decides that she will be the human archetype that inspires his art. However, after Jules learns that Phene is merely a pawn in an elaborate joke at his
expense, he decides to flee his sham marriage and leave Asolo by himself.

In the 1863 revised edition of his works, Browning revisits the play and adds a passage that makes it even clearer that Jules has erred in focusing on form, the classical ideal, at the expense of the soul, which is the essence of the romantic perspective. Only after hearing Pippa's passing song does Jules realize that he has only seen the beauty of form in Phene: “This body had no soul before, but slept / Or stirred, was beauteous or ungainly, free / From taint or foul with stain, as outward things / Fastened their image on its passiveness” (2. ll. 193-96). He had only responded to her body as an external stimulus, lacking the inward motivation of soul. Through Pippa's song Jules is awakened to a higher order of things that enables him to perceive this spirit in Phene and he has the revelation that she can still be his muse but, crucially, only as she inspires him to embody this inward soul. Embarking on a new kind of art, Jules realizes that he will either be successful at embodying soul in form or he will fail and it will be as lifeless as before: “Now, it will wake, feel, live—or die again!” (ll. 297). Jules debates if creating form from unshaped things constitutes art and whether “to evoke a soul / From form be nothing?” (ll. 299-300), but he accepts the challenge and declares “Stand aside—/ I do but break these paltry models up / To begin art afresh” (ll. 316-17).

When Monsignor, Jules’ patron, reads out loud a letter that the young artist has sent him wherein he describes the change in his concept of art, Browning makes it clear that he is continuing the symbolic exploration that he had already embarked on in Sordello of the transition from the classical to the romantic in art:

“He never had a clearly conceived Ideal within his brain till to-day. Yet since his hand could manage a chisel, he has practised expressing other men's Ideals; and, in the very perfection he has attained to, he foresees
an ultimate failure: his unconscious hand will pursue its prescribed course of old years, and will reproduce with a fatal expertness the ancient types, let the novel one appear never so palpably to his spirit. There is but one method of escape: confiding the virgin type to as chaste a hand, he will turn painter, instead of sculptor, and paint, not carve, its characteristics.” (4. II. 46-57)

Although the Greeks perfected the beauty of form, Jules embraces the possibility of imperfection in striving to depict the soul, and his decision to abandon sculpture in favor of painting reflects the transition of his thought. Indeed, Browning here again shows the influence of August Schlegel as he uses the contrast of painting and sculpture to define the difference between classical and romantic art. In focusing on the embodiment of inward soul that he recognizes through his love for Phene, rather than merely imitating the form of Greek art, Browning shows that Jules has become a romantic artist.

Jules' transition from the classical objectivity to romantic subjectivity is paralleled in Pippa Passes, as it is in Sordello, with the transition from romantic subjectivity to romantic objectivity, which is represented through the relationship of Pippa to the people of Asolo. Pippa is the first of Browning's female characters to embody the love for and reverence of a higher power that both Friedrich and August Schlegel see as the definition of the romantic age. The imagery of lush and vital nature that suffuses Pippa's prologue links her organically with the soul that is imbued in all of nature by God, and her desire to become other people mirrors Sordello’s recognition that the transcendence he perceives in his own subjective soul exists in mankind and nature as well. This requires the objective poet, or the Maker-See, to reveal the relationship between the ideal and the real that is no longer perfectly
embodied in the world. When Pippa's songs catalyze a significant action—Jules' moment of realization—this movement represents the process of illumination where those who hear Pippa’s songs are stimulated to a perception of the discrepancy between semblance and true reality and are able to act in the real world upon a perception of soul. It is the dramatization of this movement in Browning’s poetics that comprises the symbolic action of the play.

As a romantic drama, the unity of form and content of *Pippa Passes* is derived from “the bond of ideas, through a spiritual central point” (*Dialogue on Poetry* p. 101); however; in starting from the assumption that the structure and action of drama is derived from a logical relation of cause and effect, some contemporary critics of the play were puzzled at its seemingly disconnected form. A review of *Pippa Passes* in *The Spectator* (1841) maintained: “*Pippa Passes* is not a drama, but scenes in a dialogue, without coherence or action” (5, 392). Similarly according to *The Atlas* (1841): “the whole affair is a chaos of speeches, dialogues, and figures, in which we can discover neither coherency nor positive meaning... In fact the work is so deficient in unity, action, and human character, it will not be difficult to anticipate the issue of the experiment” (5, 393-95). Nevertheless, other contemporary reviews recognized that *Pippa Passes* was a symbolic rather than a realistic presentation and that its form evolved from and embodied the central idea of the play. The *Monthly Review* (1841) observed that cause and effect in the play did not derive from action and plot but rather from the symbolic center that is Pippa:

Then follow four scenes, morning, noon, evening, and night, scenes which would be altogether detached from each other were they not connected by the agency of the silk-girl, whose snatches of songs, heard from without, fall like oracles upon the ears of the already
passion-wrought listeners, give to their wavering feelings a decisive bias, and produce the climax of each scene. Thus Pippa's passings, apparently of such trivial moment, are really seen to be the moving causes of effects incalculable. (5, 392-93)

Similarly The Morning Herald (1841) recognized that the unity of form and content consisted in the ethereal figure of Pippa: “Pippa is a delicate little being, half maiden of earthly mould and half spirit—a ‘wandering Una,’ who seems intended to bring into something of unity four different actions with different dramatis personae, which in this libretto, are thrown into juxta-position” (5, 395-6). Furthermore, Elizabeth Barrett recognized, before she even met Browning, that the importance of Pippa Passes lay in its central idea: in a letter to Mary Russell Mitford she exclaimed, “There is a unity & nobleness of conception in 'Pippa Passes' which seems to me to outweigh all the riddles in riddledom” (6, 110-112) and she wrote to Browning that: “The conception is to my mind, most exquisite & altogether original—and the contrast in working out the plan, singularly expressive of various faculty” (10, 78-82), which she had praised in Browning as his ability to be both subjective and objective, both metaphysical and real.

In his analysis of Browning's poetic development from the early poems to Pippa Passes, Thomas J. Collins argues that the depiction of Pippa marks a point of regression in Browning's work. Collins posits that Browning ignores the lessons he learned in his early poems and draws Pippa like the naïve poet of Pauline who looks along with Shelley to the perfection of mankind; however, this interpretation misses the transition that is symbolized in the play. Pippa is a “Maker-See” because her songs precipitate a transformation whereby those that hear them are able to see through the mist of semblance to grasp an ideal truth. As J. M. Ariail notes, this does
not mean an ethical or moral truth (in fact some contemporary reviews found the play to be morally suspect) but a transcendent truth. Sebald realizes through his passion for Ottima and the subsequent murder of her husband that he has lost contact with the moral foundation that connects man with God and with his own soul; Jules sees that he has merely imitated the forms of art without embodying the essence of soul, which he now perceives in his love for Phene; Luigi's grandiose visions of being a martyr-hero are replaced with a true revelation about the meaning of Italian independence and he rushes to kill the Austrian Emperor as a testament to his belief in the revolutionary cause; and the Monsignor relinquishes the pride he holds in his family name and exposes their previous sins so that he can reveal the corruption of Uguccio.

If we read *Pippa Passes* as a drama that strives for verisimilitude, rather than as symbolic drama, these sudden transformations can seem nonsensical. Taking this approach, Park Honan laments that “Pippa's function in connecting the scenes has the unfortunate effect of adding a touch of the contrived and the ridiculous whenever and wherever her miracle-effecting song is heard” (91). Similarly, the personal transformations in Browning’s play can seemingly point to the possible delusive nature of the characters themselves: Ryals argues that Browning's characters only hear what they want to hear in Pippa's songs and that their subjective relativism points to Browning's own views about the problem of perspective, and E. Warick Slinn contends that “Browning focuses attention on the moment of response, and therefore on the psychology of each incident, and in doing so he portrays the way people act according to self-conceived illusions about themselves” (24). However, if we read *Pippa Passes* in the context of *Sordello* and Browning's romantic epistemology, it is apparent that Pippa's songs bring about a transformation in the *dramatis personae* whereby they are able to perceive themselves and the world around them through the
faculty of imagination, which leads directly to a perception of soul. These revelations are an enactment of the symbolic method of romantic drama that seeks to bring about a perception of noumenal soul that lies within and beyond the material world.

The relationship between Pippa’s songs and the realizations of romantic drama is derived from the symbol of song made act that Browning utilizes in Sordello to depict the manifestation of soul in the romantic age. Similarly to Wagner's concept of music drama, in Pippa Passes Browning brings together music, as the expression of the inner truth of the world, and drama, which operates in the world of cause and effect, to show that Pippa's songs precipitate a transformation in the dramatis personae, and in the reader as well, whereby they can see that they are connected to another spiritual order of existence that lies within them and transcends the material world. Thus, with Wagner in mind, it is interesting that Browning wrote to Eliza Flower to ask if she could set Pippa's lyrics to music, and also that The Morning Herald described the play as a libretto, suggesting that Browning had in mind a kind of mini opera. A contemporary review in The Examiner (1841) acknowledged that this transcendent process of illumination was the central idea of the play:

And this, carried with the light, unconscious steps of Pippa, from morning to night, is the purpose and Idea of the poem. It is to inculcate the faith in the higher than mere actual things: it is to encourage the hope that all who do rightly and cheerfully what duty they are called to, however humble, may aspire to their share of influence on the whole great scheme of the world: it is to express the truth that, at once encircling the meanest and the greatest, there is a fulness of divine life which acts upon our own existence, to be made suddenly visible or sensible by the lightest thing; and that all, even when the greatest
contraries appear to be at work, is yet, to the mind of thoughtful
insight, interdependent and harmonious. (5, 396-399)

Herbert Tucker finds this ostensible closure in *Pippa Passes*, the “transformations to a moral idea” in the play, as a disappointing turn in Browning's work, which he sees as characterized by a desire to consistently displace “the semantic or metaphysical foreclosure of meaning.” He concludes that *Pippa Passes* must therefore be an example of Browning “Writ[ing] the play against his dominant creative impulse” as an “ironic expression or negative definition to the themes of his characteristic art of disclosure” (122). Assuming that the play is a negative expression of Browning’s poetics, Tucker argues that he chose to model his other plays on *Strafford* and not on *Pippa Passes*. While I agree with Tucker that *Pippa Passes* is different in form and content to the rest of Browning's plays, I would argue that this is due to its crucial role as a symbolic articulation of Browning's concept of ideal realism and romantic drama, rather than being a strange anomaly in his oeuvre. It is also important to note that, even in *Pippa Passes*, Browning does not focus on the final completed action but on the recognition of soul that precedes action. Fish observes that even Pippa does not experience the same kind of transformation that her songs instigate in those around her. Crucially it is this process of realization that Pippa initiates within others that Browning himself hopes to facilitate in the following plays and it is this very idea that connects the later plays to *Pippa Passes*. Indeed, for Browning, it is the very discrepancy between soul and act that enables us to see the ideal and to shape our actions in accordance with it; therefore, in the plays that follow, Browning turns to irony and the tragic form.

Chapter Three
The Tragedy of Historical Forms: Soul and the Teleology of Democracy in *Strafford, King Victor and King Charles, A Soul's Tragedy and Luria,*

After having enacted the principles of romantic drama in *Pippa Passes,* Browning turned to the concept of history in his first plays to explore the relationship between irony and tragedy that is inherent in romantic symbolism. Following the Romantics in their conviction that there were two different ways to view the world—through the mind that saw the material in its empirical relations or through the imagination that perceived the material as an embodiment of the ideal—Browning recognized that empiricism and idealism not only offered two ways of viewing drama but also offered two ways of viewing the material facts of history. The empirical view of history, represented by Leopold von Ranke, argued that although the historian should always endeavor to present the objective factual data of history, it is inevitable that this narrative would be fallible as it is dependent on the individual subjective construction of the historian's mind. In contrast to empirical historicism, the philosophy of idealism, culminating in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* and also in Carlyle’s *French Revolution* and *Past and Present* among his many other works, maintained that it was possible to perceive the embodiment of the spiritual within the material phenomena of history.

These distinct views of history were framed in the same epistemological terms that dominated discourse about symbolic embodiment and the modes of empirical and symbolic drama. Indeed this connection between history and the epistemology of embodiment is reiterated by Schopenhauer when he argues that the empirical study of history is subject to the mind as it engages with the laws of cause and effect: the empirical observer “has to regard and select the events and persons not according to
their inner genuine significance expressing the Idea, but according to the outward, apparent, and relatively important significance in reference to the connexion and to the consequences” (245). For Schopenhauer this analysis of history only operates within the principle of sufficient reason and thus it is only able to “apprehend the phenomenon of which this principle is the form” (245). In contrast to this empirical approach, Schopenhauer argues that if history is conceived of poetically, or through the imagination, then it is possible to perceive “the idea, the inner being of mankind outside all relation and all time” (245). Schopenhauer returns to the popular epistemological distinction between mind and imagination to present his conviction that the historical events of empirical reality are the materialization of the underlying noumenal will, which is the same foundational concept that Browning termed soul.

Influenced by German idealism, Carlyle also views history as a symbol that bodies forth the infinite: “the spiritual will always body itself forth in the temporal history of men: the spiritual is the beginning of the temporal” (79). Although Carlyle acknowledges in his “Essay on History” the inevitable differing subjective responses to history, he argues along with Schopenhauer that this is merely a difference of epistemology. For Carlyle the ideal requires the insight of the “Seeing-Eye,” or the hero who can see into the spiritual essence of phenomenal reality. Although Morse Peckham argues that Browning’s view of history is derived from the empirical tradition of Ranke, which emphasizes the relativity inherent in the historian’s subjective account of history, we cannot fail to note the similarity of Carlyle’s concept of the “Seeing-Eye” and Browning’s “Maker-See,” the poet who reveals the relationship between the ideal and the real. Although Carlyle’s “Seeing-Eye” is analogous to his idea of the “Seer,” which is also the term that Browning uses to denote the subjective poet who looks to the ideal through his own soul, for Carlyle the
seer who has the “Seeing-Eye,” like Browning’s Maker-See, perceives the ideal that is embodied in the objective, material world. This ability to spiritually see or to know through the realm of soul is a crucial issue of epistemology for Browning, as it is for Carlyle, because it is the conceptual mind that sees material facts as they are subject to the laws of empiricism, and it is feeling and the fancy, which, grounded in soul, see material reality as a symbolic expression of its underlying spiritual meaning.

Browning’s discussion of symbolic embodiment in *Sordello*, and throughout his poetry, along with the affinity that he perceived between Schopenhauer’s philosophy and his own view of the relationship between soul and mind, provides the conceptual foundation for his symbolic notion of history. Browning’s historical view is tied to the Christian concept of history, to idealism and also to the Schlegelian theory of romantic epistemology, which are connections that he explored through Sordello’s struggle to conceive of the relationship between the romantic poet who has insight into the eternal realm of soul and the man of action who sees less but acts more in the world of phenomena. Browning’s view of history is encapsulated in Sordello’s recognition that in contrast to the perfect totality of the ideal and the real in the classical age—which is reflected in its cyclical conception of history—the teleological history of the Christian, romantic paradigm is the progressive embodiment of soul. Indeed, Sordello’s key revelation, which is so crucial to the symbolism of Browning’s plays, is that the progression of historical and political action, or “deeds,” is the evolution of action in the real that is based on a developing perception of the noumenal aspect of the world. Coleridge expresses the same conviction in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* when he suggests that national histories should be performed in the same manner as the medieval mystery plays, revealing his assumption that empirical history expresses the same underlying symbolic truths that
are embodied in the religious plays (157).

That Browning shared the German idealist view of history, popularized in England by Carlyle, is most succinctly demonstrated in “With Charles Avison,” which, as we saw, is also the poem where he defines the relationship between soul and mind in terms of symbolic embodiment. Browning reveals his symbolic view of history when he uses the prototype of the plant to discuss the progression of art forms and to criticize the idea of history that views knowledge linearly rather than organically. This linear view accounts the past as “Not knowledge in the bud which holds a fruit / Haply undreamed of in the soul's Spring-tide, / Pursed in petals Summer opens wide, / And Autumn, withering, rounds to perfect ripe,” but rather as ignorance to be dismissed by the ostensibly enlightened knowledge of the modern day. Although Browning warns against knowledge that sees itself as timeless and “styles itself truth perennial,” this is not a repudiation of the ideal but rather expresses Browning’s belief that each period of history is a different manifestation of an unchanging truth.

As the embodiment of noumenal soul in history is teleological, Browning observes that, necessarily, “Truths escape / Time's insufficient garniture,” which means that they will eventually outgrow their manifestation in a particular form. These empirical forms that embodied truth will “fade / They fall—those sheathings now grown sere, whose aid / Was infinite to truth they wrapped” (ll. 371-7). This is the very same point that Carlyle makes about symbols in Sartor Resartus when he explains that, while “time adds much to the sacredness of symbols, so likewise in his progress he at length defaces, or even desecrates them; and symbols, like all terrestrial Garments, wax old” (170). Browning maintains that, although “myth after myth” of each distinct epoch will “soon shall fade and fall,” it is precisely these fallen husks that enable newly embodied truths to emerge. Browning’s equation of history with
myth here is important. Langbaum notes how Browning’s conviction that history is progressive would seem to undermine a mythical approach; however, Langbaum observes that in contrast to Yeats, who believed that “symbols and myths are permanent, and the ideas about them change...for Browning, the myths change; myths are the progressively changing symbolic language for the same continuing idea” (578). Indeed, Sordello’s utilization of Greek mythological cosmology in his metaphor for the new romantic symbolism that will be derived from “Life’s Elemental masque” demonstrates that Browning views empirical history mythically because he sees the embodied events and persons of the observable world as the ever-progressive symbols that manifest and in some way reveal the ineffable.

The relationship between history and myth is key to Browning’s symbolism as his interest in history is part of the modern quest that is identified by both Schlegel and Carlyle when they call for a new mythology—a fresh symbolism that will express the connection between the spiritual and the temporal. Thus in the group of history plays that Browning composed while he was finishing *Sordello*, he turns to the actions and events of history for his new romantic symbolism. Browning explored in *Sordello* the significance of the ironic space between the ideal and its embodiment in romantic symbolism for facilitating spiritual sight; therefore, the romantic irony that is essential to the work of the Maker-See, and that defines the concept of historical tragedy for Browning, is derived in these plays from the discrepancy between the totality of soul and its embodiment in the successive forms of the material world.

The plays that I discuss in this chapter—*Strafford*, and *King Victor and King Charles*, which were written for the stage, and the later plays *A Soul's Tragedy* and *Luria*, which were written for an “imaginary stage”—are all tragedies of historical embodiment. Located in the empirical moment of political change, *Strafford*, *King
*Victor and King Charles* and *A Soul’s Tragedy* reveal their protagonists to be on the threshold of crucial paradigm shifts. In *Sordello* increasing democratic action is conceived by Browning as the progressive embodiment of soul in the material world; therefore, the relationship between autocracy and democracy in these plays is integral to Browning’s symbolic view of history. Although they might disagree about the nature of democracy, Browning shares Carlyle’s conviction that the forms of history are the changing symbolic manifestation of the inner essence of the world, and that political change comprises the necessary replacement of forms when they have become merely semblances that no longer express the inner idea that it once bodied forth. Browning’s historical plays focus on the irony inherent in this transition with his protagonists caught in the tragic discrepancy that exists between soul and its embodiment in these moments of paradigmatic historical change. I argue that *Luria* is the summation of these plays in that it is a symbolic articulation of the relationship between epistemology, the Maker-See and the idealist view of history.

Browning’s first romantic drama, *Strafford*, which he published and staged in 1837, was composed while he was still completing *Sordello*. That *Strafford* developed out of the symbolic treatment of history that Browning explored in *Sordello* is clear from the fact that the same confusion over what Browning was trying to do in *Sordello* has followed *Strafford* as well, with critics perceiving a contradiction between the fact that Browning endeavored to write the play as a historical tragedy, which focuses on the phenomena of the material world, and as a play “which is one of Action in Character, rather than Character in Action.” Indeed, Park Honan sees a huge discrepancy between Browning's idea of action in character and the fact that “character in *Strafford* is utterly swamped in a wild and heavy sea of action and event” (48). Similarly, Patricia Ball sees Browning's affinity with the Romantic drama
of internal character, but she defines “Romantic” in terms of the literary movement. Ball argues that as Romantic drama, *Strafford* fails because Browning's attention to historical details and the successive scenes that represent these details “force[s] other, more external considerations upon him [Strafford], and the poet's concern with the central sensibility conflicts with them” (210). However, *Strafford* is not contradictory if we view it within the context of Browning's epistemology of embodiment, and his interest in the ways in which the internal, which for Browning comprises the transcendent realm of soul, is expressed through the empirical phenomena of history. Indeed in his historical plays, Browning reverses the dramatic mode that he utilized in *Paracelsus*, which removed the external machinery of persons and events to trace the movements of the inward realm of soul, to re-emphasize the objective framework of space and time wherein the soul is made manifest.

At the same time that Browning was tracing the development of the classical to the romantic paradigm in *Sordello*, he turned in *Strafford* (1837) to seventeenth-century England leading up to the Civil War to delve into yet another instance of historical change, this time where the spirit of England is no longer seen to manifest itself in the divine right of the king but in a parliamentary democracy. Since all historical forms, as symbols, eventually become distant from the soul that they originally bodied forth, the central irony of the play lies in the fact that for Pym the truth of England is embodied in a democratic Parliament but for Strafford it is still embodied in the divine right of the king. Although in the temporal plot of the play, Browning delineates the empirical historical events that lead up to Strafford’s execution, the symbolic plot follows the transition of historical forms as the embodiment of soul. Browning’s symbolic design reveals the impact of Carlyle’s lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* on his historical plays.
Indeed, influenced by German idealism, Carlyle argues that the movement of Puritanism, as it was expressed through the actions of Pym and Vane, denotes the symbolic transition from a form that had become merely tradition, an outworn semblance, to a new organic embodiment of noumenal reality. Thus the Puritans, who play an important symbolic role in Strafford reveal what Carlyle saw as: “The struggle of men intent on the real essence of things, against men intent on the semblances and forms of things... It distinguishes true from false in Ceremonial Form, earnest solemnity from empty pageant, in all human things” (128).

Browning’s statement that Strafford focuses on action in character rather than character in action is derived from the distinction that he makes in Sordello between classical objectivity where the ideal is perfectly embodied in action and romantic interiority where action endeavors to manifest inward soul. Recent criticism analyzes Browning’s concept of action in character as pertaining to psychological interiority, but Browning emphasizes throughout Sordello that his notion of self-consciousness refers to the transcendent interiority of the romantic paradigm. Indeed Strafford’s action in character is clearly developed from the epistemological discussion that arises out of Sordello’s early existential discovery of his own divine inward power. In the second book of Sordello, the narrator explains the force of Sordello’s soul and the diffusive nature of his poetic imagination: “that is, he loves not, nor possesses One / Idea that, star-like over, lures him on / To its exclusive purpose” (Sordello 2. ll. 395-7), and Sordello, at this point in the poem, celebrates the fact that “Himself, inactive, yet is greater far / Than such as act, each stooping to his star” (2. ll. 381-2). The star is a romantic symbol for Browning in that it partakes of both the ideal and the real: the light that radiates from its halo illuminates action in the material world but its substance partakes of the celestial realm, and in both Sordello and Strafford the star
denotes for Browning the relationship between soul and act. Indeed, Browning returns many times to the symbol of the star in his romantic dramas to make the distinction between the characters that see the material as an embodiment of soul and those who view it merely from a temporal perspective. The tragedy for Sordello is that while he can perceive the noumenal framework of the universe through the self-consciousness of his soul, ultimately he will not be able to act upon this deepened insight: he is “Wise, and restricted to becoming wise” (*Sordello* 2. ll. 394); therefore, he admits that he has no symbol that will enable him to realize his perception of the ideal. However, in *Strafford* Browning turns to the plight of the individual that is: “moulded to express / Each the idea that rules him” (*Sordello* 2. ll. 385-6). In his first attempt at romantic drama, Browning explores how the king is the symbol that mediates between Strafford’s soul and his actions in the world, the ideal and the real, and the tragedy lies in the fact that Strafford's existential being is anchored in a fading form. Since the play was written for the stage, its tragedy is expressed less metaphysically than it is in the notoriously difficult and abstract *Sordello*; however, the imagery that Browning utilizes in the play reveals his symbolic design. Browning depicts Strafford’s allegiance to the king as an inversion of teleological development, and the biblical imagery that suffuses the play points to the fact that Strafford worships a false idol, which is a metaphor for a material form that no longer embodies soul. Alluding to the book of *Samuel* and the Philistines' attempt to worship the ark of God in the temple of Dagon, Vane suggests that Strafford's worship of the king, as an outworn symbol, looks backward and in doing so goes against the will of God: “And when I think on all that's past / Since that man left us, how his single arm / Rolled the advancing good of England back / And set the woful past up in its place, / Exalting Dagon where the Ark should be” (1. 2. ll. 30-34). Vane argues that Strafford’s loyalty
to the king at the expense of parliament has only helped strengthened Charles’
autocratic tyranny and oppression, and he has enabled him to act on his lust for power
without repercussion from the law.

Pym also sees Strafford’s loyalty to the king as stymying the progress of
history. Reminiscing about his early friendship with Strafford, he recollects the times
when they once strolled together animatedly discussing “Fresh argument for God
against the King” (1.1 l. 196), and their work together on “The Bill of Rights,” which
sought to limit the power of the king. Continuing the Old Testament biblical imagery,
Puritan voices call in the background to accuse Strafford of resembling “Haman,”
who tried to secretly kill the Persian Jews, and “Ahitophel,” the counselor to king
David who deserted him in favor of Absalom, to depict Strafford's perceived
treachery (1.1 l. 90). In pleading with Strafford to “shake off, with God's help, an
obscene dream / In this Ezekiel chamber, where it crept / Upon you first, and wake,
yourself, your true / And proper self, our Leader, England's Chief” (1. 2. ll. 175-8),
Pym refers to Ezekiel, which narrates the story of how God showed Ezekiel through
his dreams the terrible things transpiring in his temple wherein the inhabitants of
Jerusalem had taken to worshiping false gods. Just as Ezekiel knows that God is no
longer in the temple and foresees that it must be built anew, Pym also sees himself as
the one who must rebuild the temple that will properly house and embody the will of
God—a metaphor for the government that Pym sees as the new manifestation of soul.

The Puritans of the play prophesize that Pym’s fate will mirror Gideon’s, who
was sent by God to protect the Israelites against the Midianites, and will echo the
bravery of David against the Philistines. Pym perceives that he is on the cusp of a new
dawn and he feels that it is his responsibility to guide England away from an outworn
symbol toward the new embodiment of truth:
Heaven grows dark above:
Let's snatch one moment ere the thunder fall,
To say how well the English spirit comes out
Beneath it! All have done their best, indeed,
From lion Eliot, that grand Englishman,
To the least here: and who, the least one here,
When she is saved (for her redemption dawns
Dimly, most dimly, —but it dawns)
Who'd give at any price his hope away
Of being named along with the Great Men? (1. 2. ll. 164-173)

Pym sees Strafford’s allegiance to the king as the as the barrier between his own
ability to act upon a perception of soul—to be one of the “Great Men” or heroes,
those individuals who have divine insight into when a symbol no longer bodies forth
the ideal and usher in its new material expression. Yet although Pym sees Strafford as
a threat to Parliament, the new form, it is Strafford who implores the king to call
Parliament after deciding to go to war with Scotland because he obtained proof that
the Scots' League and Covenanters have intrigued with France. When Parliament
makes it clear to the king that they will not endorse his war with Scotland, he
continues to assert his authority by dissolving their new formation.

Browning stays very close to the narrative of historical events that lead up to
Strafford’s execution, but he develops the fictional role of Lady Carlisle to illuminate
the existential nature of Strafford’s tragedy. When Stafford leaves to fight on behalf
of the king against the Scottish, Lady Carlisle fears that the king will betray him,
warning Strafford that “Charles never loved you” (2. 3. l. 214). Expressing her deep
regret over her own role in Strafford having “set / His heart abidingly on Charles,” (ll.
she tells him that she has too has had to accept that the “One image stamped within you” (l. 233) has proven to be false. Lady Carlisle sympathizes with Strafford over the difficulty of relinquishing such a beloved image of the king, an ideal that only “turn[s] blank / The else imperial brilliance of your mind,— / A weakness, but most precious,—like a flaw / I’ the diamond” (ll. 233-6). Indeed when Strafford misses the import of her warning, Lady Carlisle cannot bear to deprive him of his existential foundation: “Ah, no— / One must not lure him from a love like that! / Oh let him love the King and die!” (ll. 242-3). Even when Lady Carlisle anticipates the king's final betrayal of Strafford, she cannot abide the thought of undermining the symbol that gives his soul purpose: “Prove the King faithless / I take away / All Strafford cares to live for” (4. 1. l. 136).

Although Strafford remains tethered to the will of the king, he finds himself on the precipice of great historical change. When he leaves England to pursue a war with the Scottish against the dictates of Parliament, he realizes for the first time that a paradigm shift is taking place wherein the interests of king and country are no longer indissoluble:

Only God can save him [the king] now.
Be Thou about his bed, about his path!
His path! Where's England's path? Diverging wide,
And not to join again the track my foot
Must follow—whither? All that forlorn way
Among the tombs! Far—far—till... What, they do
Then join again, these paths? (ll. 270-6)

Strafford questions the very foundation of his faith, but his love for the king, his “one star for guide,” impels him onward “To breast the bloody sea / That sweeps before
me” (ll. 294-5). Strafford renews his allegiance to the king even though he now acknowledges: “Night has its first, supreme, forsaken star” (l. 296). Following Browning's star imagery from Sordello to Strafford, it is apparent that the king is Strafford's “forsaken star” because he represents a symbol that no longer bodies forth soul; however, although Strafford realizes that the king is no longer the embodiment of the ideal, he is unable to embrace the forms that will manifest the spirit of a new age.

Strafford’s loyalty to Charles means that even when he learns that the king has made an unexpected truce with the Scots and Parliament, the fact that he already has evidence that Parliament and the Scottish have been colluding, leads him to declare that “God put it in my mind to love, serve, die / For Charles, but never to obey him more!” (3. 2. ll. 156-7); therefore, he fights at Durham despite his knowledge of the king’s truce. Strafford expects praise when is recalled by the king; however, while he was gone, Pym left the king with no option but to sign an order of treason against him. Lady Carlisle offers Strafford the opportunity to flee with her when it becomes apparent that Pym will seek his execution, but Browning depicts Strafford as willingly accepting his sentence because he knows that it is only in death that he will know the truth again from which he is now divorced in the empirical moment of history:

Earth fades, heaven breaks on me: I shall stand next
Before God's throne: the moment's close at hand
When man the first, last time, has leave to lay
His whole heart bare before its Maker, leave
To clear up the long error of a life
And choose one happiness for evermore. (4. 2. ll. 204-9)

The speeches between Strafford and Pym in the final scene reiterate Browning's
theory of embodiment, which posits that it is only in death and in reaching God that we can partake of the spiritual meaning that is necessarily obfuscated in the material world. Even Pym, who feels that he has done what is best for England, concedes that everything human is fallible: “I have done / Her bidding—poorly, wrongly—it may be, With ill effects—for I am weak, a man: / Still I have done my best, my human best” (5. 2. ll. 281-4). Despite his decision to put Strafford to death, Pym still loves his old friend and he contemplates the next world where he will walk with him again; when, in the light of the absolute, he will be “Purged from all error, gloriously renewed” (l. 298). Strafford has recognized that the transition from king to Parliament is part of a larger evolution of history, but he feels that his soul is inextricably bound to the old paradigm and that he cannot effect the change that he sees as otherwise imminent; thus he laments that it is “dreary, / To have to alter our whole life in age— The time past, the strength gone! As well die now” (306-8).

Although Strafford has exclaimed his willingness to die, at the very moment of his death he has a sudden vision of the pain and destruction that will bring about the new symbolic embodiment of soul, which is Browning’s allusion to the horrors of the Civil War. The original version of the play ends with Strafford imploring Pym to explain this vision to him and to God and with Pym's cold response that he must follow wherever the will of England takes him; however, in the 1863 edition of his works, Browning adds two extra speeches by Strafford that serve to focus the ending less on the complicated issue of how destruction is sometimes the only means by which reality can return from semblance to truth—an idea that Browning had not broached at all in the play except for in this last moment—but rather focuses on the individual soul and the symbol that spurs soul’s development in the actions of the real world. When Stafford declares to Pym: “There, I will thank you for the death, my
friend! / This is the meeting: let me love you well!” (ll. 356-7), and in the very last line when he reasserts his desire to die: “O God, I shall die first—I shall die first” (l. 360), Browning returns to an emphasis on Strafford’s tragic inability to act, and thereby exist, in a world whose forms are no longer of his own paradigm.

In Browning’s first attempt at romantic drama, he adheres closely to the historical facts surrounding Strafford’s career to emphasize the particularity of historical manifestation. Yet critics of the play found that it assumed a level of prior knowledge about the historical setting that would exceed the every day spectator. The Times lamented the fact that: “The tragedy is very historical; it would be almost unintelligible to one who had not made himself acquainted with the minutiae of the eventful period to which it relates, and hence we almost fear its becoming so popular as its intrinsic merits deserve” (3, 391-2). At the same time that Browning wished to delineate historical phenomena, he does so in order to explore the tragedy of a soul wedded to a symbol that no longer embodies the inward idea of the age. The True Sun recognized that Browning’s focus in the play was this concentration on Strafford’s inward dilemma and its impact on his actions, which made the play more “the development of a philosophical question than an action upon the emotions of the audience,” but they argued that it was “too cold and curious an interest for the theatre—more of appeal to the broad and elemental passions of humanity might, we apprehend, advantageously mingle with the intensely realised struggle of the public men of England in the seventeenth century” (3, 392-3).

It is precisely Browning’s endeavor to depict the life of the soul that Macready found to be so problematic with Strafford. Macready wrote in his diary: “I find more grounds for exception than I had anticipated. I had been too much carried away by the truth of the character to observe the meanness of plot, and occasional obscurity” (vol
Responsible for the financial success of the play, Macready was less interested in Strafford's internal plight than in the entertainment of external action. Recent critics such as Patricia Ball have also been displeased with what they perceive as a conflict between content and form in Strafford. However, in contrast to Macready's concerns, she emphasizes how Browning compromised his Romanticism by deferring to Macready's popular demands, and that in imitating the Elizabethan structure of Shakespeare's drama, the form of Browning's play conflicts with his interest in Strafford's internal self. With the composition of his first staged romantic drama, Browning had not yet found a sufficient form to convey his symbolic design; however, the progression of Strafford to King Victor and King Charles and then from these early plays to his two final verse dramas shows that Browning was moving from working within a popular form to finding a more original structure that would suit the experimental, philosophical drama that he was writing—albeit one that was essentially incompatible with the style of drama prevailing on the Victorian stage.

In Browning's next play, King Victor and King Charles (1842), he continues to explore historical tragedy from a transcendental perspective whereby his protagonists are caught up in the progressive manifestation of soul. Where Strafford presents the tragedy of a man whose foundational symbol no longer embodies the truth for his age, in King Victor and King Charles Browning again explores the transition from kingship to democracy as a symbolic exploration of the soul as it is embodied in act throughout history. Divided into two acts, the form of King Victor and King Charles is more experimental and looks ahead to the symbolic structure of A Soul's Tragedy: the symbolic action of this early play juxtaposes the old form—embodied by the father, King Victor—with the emerging new form that is embodied in his son—the future King Charles—and Browning represents this symbolism in the compressed
structure of his play by separating it into part one, “King Victor,” and part two, “King Charles,” which each transpire over one day in the years 1730 and 1731 respectively.

In focusing on the relationship between Victor Amadeus II, Duke of Savoy and King of Sardinia, and his son, Charles Emanuel III, Browning focuses the action of his mimetic plot on Victor’s attempt to reclaim his crown after he had abdicated in favour of Charles. Browning’s empirical account of the historical events surrounding this issue is anchored in the personal relationship between Victor and Charles. While Charles has always sought his father's love, his lack of interest in political intrigue in contrast to his brother, Philip, meant that Victor paid no attention to him, and when Philip, the heir to the throne, is killed, it only increases Victor's bitterness toward his younger son. Thus, when King Victor announces that he intends to abdicate the throne for his son to take his place, Charles is confused about his motives, believing that the only reason his father would abdicate the crown to him would be as part of a plan to prove that he is inept, which would then give the child of Victor's mistress, and future wife, a chance to take the throne. Victor tries to convince Charles that he wants to give up the crown because he is tired and desires peace in the last years of his life, but it soon becomes apparent that Victor's political machinations have turned the people and the nobles against him, and that in pledging allegiance to both Austria and Spain, both countries have made an alliance against him. Victor believes that Charles' devotion to him will mean that he will continue the political policies that will consolidate his absolute rule, and that Charles will not be held accountable for these unpopular policies in the same way as Victor because they were put in place before he had taken the throne. However, Victor is surprised and dismayed when Charles breaks away from his father's legacy and begins to take political actions that move away from an absolute monarchy and sow the seeds for democratic change.
Browning’s temporal plot presents a fully realized conflict between father and son, but in the embedded symbolic plot, he traces the historical transition of symbolic forms. This subtle meaning is illuminated in Charles' declaration to his wife, Polyxena, that in replacing his father:

a new world

Brightens before me; he is moved away

—The dark form that eclipsed it, he subsides

Into a shape supporting me like you,

And I, alone, tend upward, more and more

Tend upward: I am grown Sardinia's King. (1. 2. ll. 354-9)

Using the image of organic teleology, “I tend upward” and “I am grown Sardinia's King,” Browning reveals that Charles has not only gained political power in taking the crown but he has moved out of the darkness of his father's eclipse, the fading historical form, to be the new symbolic embodiment of noumenal soul.

As in Sordello and Strafford, this progressive manifestation of soul is reflected in Charles’ increasing democratic action. At the start of part two, “King Charles,” we learn of Charles' success as a leader: he has appeased the people and the nobles and he has secured a treaty with Austria and Spain. Charles believes that he has brought about peace through “truthfulness” as opposed to Victor's political machinations, and even D'Ormea, who has been intricately involved with all of Victor's political intrigue, sees that Charles is a worthy leader and tries to warn him of his father's plans. D'Oremea's prediction that Victor will return is confirmed when Victor seeks to reclaim his crown because he fears that Charles' actions will ultimately undo the political dominion that he has consolidated for himself:

I left you this the absolutest rule
In Europe: do you think I sit and smile,
Bid you throw power to the populace—
See my Sardinia, that has kept apart
Join in the mad and democratic whirl
Whereeto I see all Europe haste full tide?
England casts off her kings; France mimics England:
This realm I hoped was safe. (2. 1. ll. 310-9)

The conflict between Victor and Charles over the crown, between autocracy and democracy, symbolizes the struggle between old and new symbols. That Charles' year in power is symbolic of this new paradigm is emphasized when Charles tells his father “a year has wrought an age's change. / This people's not the people now, you once / Could benefit; nor is my policy / Your policy” (2. 2. ll. 307-9), and in his feeling that his father has come to “Restore the past—prevent the future!” (2. 2. ll. 226-7). When Victor exclaims that he intends to keep the crown of Sardinia whole, Charles argues that the temporal power of the king is no longer an embodiment of God’s will; thus, he tells Victor to “Keep within your sphere and mine! / It is God's province we usurp on, else” (2. 2. 281-2). Charles knows that God is immutable soul, which is obfuscated when it is embodied in the various symbols of the temporal realm, yet he feels that it is his responsibility to find truth in the complex forms of the material world: “Here, blindfolded through the maze of things we walk / By a slight clue of false, true, right and wrong; / All else is rambling and presumption. I / Have sworn to keep this kingdom: there's my truth” (2. 1. ll. 284-7).

Charles has the deep spiritual vision that allows him to see that autocratic kingship is no longer the expression of soul, and Victor makes it clear that all he wants from the crown are the “baubles,” the clothing of kingship, or what Carlyle
would call the difference between true and false in “Ceremonial Form”—the semblance that replaces the true reality when a form is no longer organically connected to the truth that it bodies forth in the world. Yet, although Charles recognizes Victor's falsehood, his love for his father makes it very difficult to defy his wishes. Polyxena, who shares Charles’ symbolic vision of history, recognizes that Charles is beginning to waver and she implores him not to forfeit his “soul's charge.” Polyxena’s language here is derived from Browning’s own symbolic vocabulary for symbolic embodiment. Declaring: “Body, that's much, —and soul, that's more—and realm, / That's most of all!” (2. 1. ll. 372-3), Polyxena argues that since the ideal and the real are united in Charles’ relationship to his realm, he is the prototypical symbol that gives meaning to all other modes of embodiment. In imploring Charles to “Pause here upon this strip of time / Allotted you out of eternity! / Crowns are from God: you in his name hold yours” (2. 2. ll. 253-5), Polyxena juxtaposes space and time with the ideal to show that Charles is the new mediating symbol that will body forth soul.

Recognizing the significance of the paradigm shift that he represents, Charles agrees with D'Ormea that they should arrest Victor if he tries to return; however, the love that he has for his father inevitably leads him to relinquish the crown. The symbolism that Browning interweaves subtly throughout the play culminates in Victor's final speech when he finally realizes that he is the fading symbol of an outworn historical paradigm: witness to the love between Charles and Polyxena, Victor admits that “Hardly till this moment, / When I seem learning many other things / Because the time for using them is past. / If ’t were to do again! That’s idly wished. / Truthfulness might prove policy as good / As guile” (ll. 345-50). Victor has a revelation that his re-established position as king is founded on semblance rather than the true reality:
Guile has made me King again.

*Louis—t was in King Victor's time: —long since,*

*When Louis reign'd and, also, Victor reign'd.*

How the world talks already of us two!

God of eclipse and each discoulour'd star,

Why do I linger then? (2. 2. ll. 354-9)

In this last speech of *King Victor and King Charles*, Browning uses the symbol of the forsaken or fading star, as he does in *Strafford*, to conceive of a symbol that no longer bodies forth soul. In having Victor place himself with the reign of Louis XIV, a proponent of the divine right of kings, which he emphasizes in italics, Browning shows, as he does in *Strafford*, that the absolute rule of monarchy is no longer the embodiment of the spiritual for the modern age. In reiterating Charles' own earlier association of his father with an eclipse, Victor's demonstrates the realization that he has come to where he now sees that in trying to re-establish the idea of absolute rule in the stead of democracy, he has obscured the light of divine truth.

In their biography *Robert Browning's Dramatic Imagination*, Kennedy and Hair view Victor's sudden collapse at this point of revelation as the “crowning weakness” of the play (74), yet our interpretation of Browning's success as a playwright here, and of the significance of Victor's death, very much depends on the dramatic tradition that we place him in. If, like Kennedy and Hair, we start from the assumption that Browning intended *King Victor and King Charles* to be an empirical historical study, Victor's death would indeed be a nonsensical ending to Browning's play; however, if we read the play as a romantic drama, we can see that Browning intended Victor's death to be a crucial symbolic moment in the play wherein the tragedy shifts from Charles, who will ultimately regain his crown, to Victor, who dies
“with kingship dying too” because it is by means of his death that the new symbolic forms will emerge. Although Victor declares that he does not repent of his life’s actions, actions that were truth for an earlier stage of history—a conviction that he shares with Browning—Victor relinquishes life in the same way that Eglamor dies after Sordello wins the bardic competition because his death symbolizes the demise of a particular historical paradigm in the progressive historical manifestation of soul.

Browning wrote *King Victor and King Charles* with the intention that it would be performed, but the same problems that Browning found with rendering symbolic drama on stage in *Strafford* followed the latter as well. When Macready read through the play he exclaimed that it was “a great mistake” and told Browning that he would not stage it. Browning went ahead and published in the second series of *Bells and Pomegranates*, but reviewers found the play difficult to understand even as a closet drama. *The Spectator* lamented that Browning presented his own theory of a historical situation in an overly “allusive and mystical way” that made it “unintelligible” to those who were not familiar with the facts of the period (5, 400-1). Similarly, the review in *The Athenaeum* regrets that Browning's play, which is “full of thought, full of learning, full of fancy,” takes a form that is likely to confuse the “superficial observer” (5, 402-5). However, Richard Hengist Horne in his response to Browning's dramatic works in *The Church of England Quarterly Review* argued that *King Victor and King Charles* showed Browning “to possess the finest dramatic genius” and that it certainly had the potential to be staged. Nevertheless, in a comment reminiscent of Lamb's essay on Shakespeare, it is telling that they felt as an “intellectual drama” that it should have been read rather than performed, indicating that Browning’s play was incompatible with the empirical emphasis of the Victorian stage that was seen by many to preclude the faculty of imagination and the symbolic drama (6, 381-388).
It was only when Browning turned to writing for an “imaginary stage” that he was finally able to fully develop the symbolic plot that he had attempted to portray in his first two plays intended for the stage. The settings for these final plays are historical but are not taken directly from specific historical events, which leaves Browning more room to develop his symbolism and to expect less from the audience in terms of the detail of their historical knowledge. *A Soul’s Tragedy* was published with *Luria* in the last series of *Bells and Pomegranates* in 1846, but Browning first mentions it in a letter to Domett in 1842, wherein he explained that after publishing *The Return of the Druses*, he would “finish a wise metaphysical play about a great mind and soul turning to ill” (5, 355-57). Again it is important to note Browning’s choice of language here when analyzing whether action in character refers to psychological or realistic drama, with its implications for the empirical interpretation of the dramatic monologue, or whether it refers to the symbolic drama of ideas, which suggests that the form of the monologue belongs to a different literary tradition. It is significant that Browning refers to the epistemology of “mind and soul” in his description of *A Soul’s Tragedy*, which he had already discussed at length in *Sordello* to explicate symbolic embodiment, and that he defined the play as “metaphysical” in nature, which also reveals its symbolic design.

*A Soul’s Tragedy* develops out of his first symbolic history plays in that Browning goes from tracing the development of democracy as the progressive embodiment of soul back to sixteenth century medieval Italy where the Roman Catholic Church is still the living expression of noumenal truth. The romantic irony of the play lies not in championing autocracy at the time when democracy represents the manifestation of soul, but in championing democracy at the time when soul is expressed through autocracy. The protagonist of Browning’s play, Chiappino, is a
man of insight, who has Carlyle’s “Seeing-Eye” into the realm of soul, and as a revolutionary who opposes Papal rule, he seeks to realize his deep perceptions through freeing his city of Faenza from the authority of Rome.

Browning emphasizes the symbolic design of A Soul's Tragedy in his subtitle to the play, which states that act one is “the poetry of Chiappino's life” and the second act “its prose.” Ryals, Poston and DuBois all agree that Chiappino's “poetry” lies within his liberal principles and that his prose represents the abandonment of these principles, but reading Browning’s subtitle through the symbolic language that he had developed in Sordello reveals the very different emphasis that he makes in the play. When Browning juxtaposed poetry and prose to elucidate the symbolic meaning of the title Bells and Pomegranates, it was one of a series of polarities that he used to denote the noumenal realm of soul and its manifestation in the real. In writing the second act in prose rather than in blank verse, Browning represents the embodied empirical world of time and space in contrast to poetry, the timeless Platonic truths.

As such Chiappino's poetry is his perception of soul whereas his liberal politics, his prose, are but its particular material expression. Thus I would argue that the play is not about Chiappino's political vacillations and his failure to uphold his republican principles, as it has been previously thought; rather, it endeavors to explore the more specific philosophical question of whether the subtilized spirit, to borrow Browning’s phrase from his Essay on Shelley, requires revolution or whether it can be made manifest in already existing forms, which becomes the vehicle for a broader discussion about the complex nature of embodiment and the discernment of the spiritual in the progressive historical forms that it takes in the finite.

Browning shows in the first act that Chiappino’s “poetry” is his perception of the ideal by making the same comparison between Chiappino and Luitolfo that he
makes in *Sordello* between Sordello and Taurello, the man who has insight into soul and the man of action who sees less but turns it to account in the world. As the man of insight, Chiappino is unable to articulate what he can spiritually see, which means that he has been unable to embody his deep vision in the world of sense and action.

Chiappino resents the ability of his friend, Luitolfo, who does not see as deeply as he but can speak easily about what he has seen. He feels more acutely his own failure in being so close to an individual “Whose slight free loose and incapsacious soul / Gave his tongue scope to say whate'er he would” (1. ll. 170-1), and laments his own “craven tongue, / These features which refuse the soul its way, / Reclalm Thou! Give me truth—truth, power to speak— / And after be sole present to approve / The spoken truth!—or, stay that spoken truth” (1. ll. 44-6). The emphasis on speech, or discoursing as Browning referred to it in his explanation for *Bells and Pomegranates* where it is juxtaposed with music, denotes the imperfect manifestation of soul, and in emphasizing that Chiappino is unable to speak in contrast to Luitolfo’s fluency, Browning symbolizes the struggle of the man of insight in comparison to the man of action. Up until the beginning of the play we learn that Chiappino, like Sordello, has experienced an existential stasis whereby he is unable to act upon soul, which is why he has also not been able to express his love for Eulalia nor his profound feelings of agony now that she is engaged to marry Luitolfo.

Since Chiappino is a man of insight rather than a man of action, Browning presents his democratic principles as constituting an abstract idealism, which will be significant for his discussion of history, political action and embodiment in the play:

> I trust in Nature for the stable laws
> Of Beauty and Utility. —Spring shall plant,
> And Autumn garner to the end of time:
I trust in God—the Right shall be the Right
And other than the wrong, while he endures:
I trust in my own soul, that can perceive
The outward and the inward, nature's good
And God's: so, seeing these men and myself,
Having a right to speak, thus do I speak. (I. ll. 256-65)

To realize these abstract ideals, Chiappino desires to free Faenza through a violent strike that will sunder the yoke of Papal rule. He resents the fact that Eulalia and Luitolfo have abandoned the idea of breaking completely with Rome through revolution and now advocate for patience and peace:

Here's our Faenza birthplace; they send here
A provost from Ravenna: how he rules,
You can at times be eloquent about.
“Then, end his rule! “ — “Ah yes, one stroke does that!
But patience under wrong works slow and sure.
Must violence still bring peace forth? He, beside,
Returns so blandly one's obeisance! ah—
Some latent human virtue may be lingering yet,
Some human sympathy which, once excite,
And all the lump were leavened quietly:
So no more of striking for this time!” (I. ll. 94-104)

In Browning’s mimetic plot, Chiappino’s own revolutionary designs have been thwarted in that his liberal stance has caught the attention of the provost who has banished him on pain of death from the city. Luitolfo goes to the provost to plead peacefully on behalf of his friend, but Chiappino insists that whatever the outcome of
the meeting might be, he will stay and fight for Faenza's liberty. It is at this point that Chiappino and Eulalia's discussion is interrupted by Luitolfo who frantically tells them the unexpected news that he has killed the provost, although it turns out later that the provost's injuries were not fatal. Chiappino quickly provides his friend with a previously prepared disguise and escape plan and exclaims valiantly that he will take the fall for his friend. However, in a surprising turn of events, the people hail Chiappino as the next provost, and when the Pope's Legate, Ogniben, comes from Ravenna at the beginning of the second act to invest power in this new provost, his long dialogues with Chiappino are crucial for the embedded symbolic plot.

Critics have been unanimous in viewing Ogniben as a sophistical figure who lures Chiappino away from his republican principles, yet while it is clear that Ogniben makes an argument that obviously benefits him and the status quo, his arguments are certainly not specious. Indeed, Browning wrote to Elizabeth Barrett that he meant Ogniben to be “a man of wide speculation and narrow practice,—universal understanding of men and sympathy with them, yet professionally restricted claims for himself, for his own life” (12, 200-2). The specific problem that Ogniben addresses in the play is made more apparent when we know that Browning attended Carlyle's *Lectures on Hero-Worship*, and was reading his work on Cromwell while writing this play, and that subsequently many of Ogniben's speeches are strikingly similar to the thoughts of Carlyle about the problems inherent in revolution. When Ogniben says that he wants Chiappino to take the position of provost because he wants to find a reconciliation that will maintain order, he echoes Carlyle's argument in his lecture on “The Hero as King, Cromwell, Napoleon: Modern Revolutionism” that before Napoleon compromised his ideals, he was in fact a true democrat because he knew that authority was necessary in order for the Revolution to continue to prosper.
Carlyle says that Napoleon wanted “to bridle in that great devouring, self devouring French Revolution; to tame it, so that its intrinsic purpose can be made good, that it may become organic, and be able to live among other organisms and formed things, not as a wasting destruction alone” (150). Here Carlyle frames revolution and political change in terms of the transition from old to new symbolic forms, and he emphasizes that the ideal must always accommodate itself to, and grow within, the real, which is an important argument that Ogniben expresses in the play when he attempts to convince Chiappino that the young man's ideals can be embodied within the already existing forms that constitute the current autocratic political structure.

On arrival in Faenza, Ogniben explains that his purpose has always been to help people realize their principles but only as he can reconcile them with already established forms. In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, Browning explains that he removed from the play a long sermon spoken by Ogniben, which would have explained further his motivation for reconciling Chiappino's principles within the existing structure of government under the authority of Rome. In the letter, Browning tells Elizabeth that if he had kept the original sermon in the play, Ogniben would have explained how he himself actually believes in Chiappino's ideas of a pure republic and democratic equality, but that his favor to the papacy is part of a view with a longer scope—holding that God's will is inextricably bound with Rome—which is a perspective that enables him to reject ideas that might benefit him personally. In removing the theological foundation from Ogniben's attempt to convince Chiappino that his principles can be realized under the authority of Rome, Browning brings more emphasis to the philosophical quandary of the play, which is of more importance to him than any theological motivation; however, if he had included it, Ogniben's sermon might have made it clearer that, at this specific moment in history, soul is still
embodied in the form of the Roman Catholic Church. Ogniben attempts to show Chiappino that the old political structure is entirely compatible with his ideals so as to achieve his own goal of reconciling revolution with the existing status quo, but it is also the vehicle for Browning’s symbolic plot in the play, which explores the question of whether a new conviction of how soul should be symbolically embodied in the material world can be reconciled with already existing forms.

Insisting that the only natural government is the “Best” and the “Wisest,” Ogniben echoes Carlyle's emphasis on the superiority of a heroic leader over the results of a ballot box. Ogniben observes in Chiappino that it is precisely the nobility of his soul, and its wide sympathy that enables him to recognize the equality of all men, that is self-defeating and precludes effective action. He asks Chiappino to consider “what is this perpetual yearning to exceed, to subdue, to be better than, and a king over, one's fellows,—all that you so disclaim,—but the very tendency yourself are most proud of, and under another form, would oppose to it,—only in a lower stage of manifestation?” (2. ll. 177-83). Browning’s choice of language here is critical because in arguing that the desire to lead people as king is but “a lower stage of manifestation” of the nobility of soul and the perception of truth that Chiappino claims for himself, he emphasizes that Ogniben is referring to the progressive nature of symbolic embodiment. Indeed Ogniben’s argument is similar to Carlyle's declaration in his On Heroes that the revolutionary leader is but a further progression of the divine role of the king: they are different manifestations of the same hero “who lives in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine and Eternal, which exists always, unseen to most, under the Temporary, Trivial” (99). Here Ogniben's “wide sympathy,” like Browning’s own, encompasses a transcendental awareness of history where he can see that the desire to lead above men is an earlier manifestation of the
same democratic truth that Chiappino perceives, and therefore he tries to convince him that autocracy is still a form that partakes of his original principles.

Chiappino finds Ogniben's arguments to be very persuasive and the aspirant leader begins to contemplate whether he can truly stay faithful to his principles if they are embodied in a form other than a democratic republic. Eulalia and Luitolfo are dismayed that Chiappino has been so quickly swayed by Ogniben's arguments, but Chiappino tries to explain to Eulalia that his principles have not changed and that he has only chosen to manifest them in an already existing form:

Now, why refuse to see that in my present course I change no principles, only readapt them more adroitly? I had despaired of, what you may call the material instrumentality of life; of ever being able to rightly operate on mankind through such a deranged machinery as the existing modes of government: but now, if I suddenly discover how to inform these perverted institutions with fresh purpose, bring the functionary limbs once more into immediate communication with, and subjection to, the soul I am about to bestow on them—do you see? Why should one desire to invent, as long as it remains possible to renew and transform? (2. ll. 220-32)

Using Browning’s language of symbolic embodiment—body and soul, the material and the spiritual—Chiappino implores Eulalia to see that rather than abandoning their cause, he only wants to infuse soul into already existing forms so that they may embody truth once again. He presents her with an architectural metaphor to try and explain what he means by this: he asks her to imagine that he has the option of either building his new palace—as a metaphor for his government—on a completely empty building lot or of using the already constructed palace as a starting point for his new edifice. He concedes that the foundation of the old edifice is “ruinous” and “wrongly
constructed” but that he would rather “restore, enlarge, abolish or unite these to heart's content” than face the certain prospect of failure by starting to build without any tools or materials at all. This looks back to Sordello’s discovery that when the past forms of history are demolished to make room for the new forms, they leave behind the scaffolding for the next age that is integral to its structure, and it also reflects Carlyle’s belief that even the new symbols that will embody the ideal must continue to grow within the real rather than be “a wasting destruction alone.”

Chiappino's believes his principles to remain unchanged, but he confesses to Ogniben that he is nervous that the people will perceive him to be inconsistent:

though you and I may thoroughly discern—and easily, too—the right principle at the bottom of such a movement, and how my republicanism remains thoroughly unaltered, only takes a form of expression hitherto commonly judged (and heretofore by myself) incompatible with its existence,—when thus I reconcile myself to an old form of government instead of proposing a new one.” (2. ll. 372-79)

Ogniben’s reiterates Chiappino’s own emphasis on “expression” to suggest the crucial symbolic idea of the play: “As for adding to the stock of truths,—impossible! Thus you see the expression of them is the grand business” (2. ll. 395-8). In repeating what he sees as significant in Chiappino’s word choice, Ogniben call attention to the philosophic importance of Browning’s language in that while soul is unchanging, it is expressed, or manifested in the material world in ways that will continually change, which is a stance that reflects Browning's own symbolic view of history.

The tension between Ogniben's symbolic sense of history, and his own finite position as Legate, means that he takes it upon himself to show Chiappino that what he perceives of as false in history can still be seen as an embodiment of truth.
Ogniben links his philosophical observation to Chiappino's change of heart: “you have got a truth in your head about the right way of governing people, and you took a mode of expressing it which now you consider to be imperfect. But what then? There is truth in falsehood, falsehood in truth” (2. ll. 398-402). It is important to note here that Ogniben's arguments do not espouse philosophical relativism but rather a version of Browning's theory of embodiment. When soul embodies itself in the material world and enters into the categories of cause and effect, what is true becomes necessarily implicated in what is false, but for Browning the crucial point is that both manifested truth and falsity partake of the original truth; therefore, the embodied world is not meaningless, rather it is complicated because everything in it is meaningful. As he says in *Fifine at the Fair*: “Truth inside, and outside, truth also; and between / Each, falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence” (ll. 2182-3). It is key that Browning has his casuist, Don Juan, voice one of his deepest convictions about embodiment here, as his casuists so often do, not because it questions his foundational views about the possibility of transcendent truth and the ability of the poet to impart this truth, but rather because it provides Browning with a way to reiterate his central belief that with the sympathy of imagination it is possible to see truth in even its lowest expression or manifestation—as we see when Browning’s truths, which are everywhere formulated in his symbolic language, are articulated in the self-serving arguments of his sophists.

Browning is emphatic about making this distinction in *A Soul's Tragedy*. When Chiappino begins to mistake Ogniben's arguments for a kind of relativism, Ogniben insists that it is not. He explains that he has the “quickened eyesight,” the spiritual vision that gives him Browning’s sense of transcendent sympathy to see truth in falsity and beauty in ugliness, and he emphasizes that he always strives to refer these various qualities back to their origin in the absolute, or God:
I answer, “So I do; but preserve the proportions of my sympathy, however finelier or widelier I may extend its action.” I desire to be able, with a quickened eyesight, to descry beauty in corruption where others see foulness only: but I hope I shall also continue to see a redoubled beauty in the higher forms of matter, where already every body sees no foulness at all. I must retain, too, my old power of selection, and choice of appropriation, to apply to such new gifts; else they only dazzle instead of enlightening me.” (2. ll. 467-78)

Browning’s choice of the nouns “selection” and “appropriation” and the verb “apply” all emphasize fitting the truth that is perceived for a particular purpose or bringing it to action, which reveals Ogniben’s interest in realizing the ideal. Ogniben argues that his gift of seeing the ideal must be “enlightening,” used to inform action, rather than “dazzle” him, which would result in an abstract idealism that precludes meaningful action. Ogniben, like Browning, says that discerning truth involves looking at both to soul and its embodiments in the forms of the finite world: “God has his Archangels and consorts with them—tho’ he made too, and intimately sees what is good in the worm” (2. ll. 478-80). Thus Ogniben is Browning’s archetypal casuist, not merely because he is a sophist, but because his self-serving argument actually embodies the argument about the nature of progressive symbolic embodiment and the various manifestations of truth, which explains Browning’s repetition of Ogniben’s statement: “Observe, I speak only as you profess to think and, so, ought to speak: I do justice to your own principles, that is all” (2. ll. 480-82). Indeed, although Ogniben is acting on behalf of the Church, his arguments establish the symbolic context of history that the reader must perceive through his/her “cooperative fancy” so as to sympathize with and interpret the philosophic nature of Chiappino’s tragedy.

As Chiappino still does not have this same kind of transcendent scope as
Ogniben, he uses a mathematical metaphor to help him elucidate Browning’s theory of embodiment: “I help men to carry out their own principles: if they please to say two and two make five, I assent, so they will but go on and say, four and four make ten” (2. ll. 365-8). Five is clearly not the sum of two and two; however, if this sum is instead assumed to be true, then ten as the sum of four plus four would follow logically from it and become, not only consistent, but true in its own right—thus a true statement may issue from a false one. Ogniben wants to show Chiappino that if he proceeded in a right fashion on the basis of a false supposition—in other words, if he came to support the political forms that he previously saw as false—he would in fact not be acting inconsistently, since all forms partake of the original truth. This is why Ogniben exclaims to Chiappino: “No man ever told one great truth, that I know, without the help of a good dozen of lies at least, generally unconscious ones” (2. ll. 402-4). It is Ogniben's awareness of the nature of embodiment that leads him to declare that it is “through the contradictory expression” that “men should look painfully for, and trust to arrive eventually at, what you call the true principle at the bottom” (2. ll. 410-13). This is a crucial point in the play because it is this “contradictory expression” of truth that constitutes tragedy for Browning, and it is by means of the ironic space between soul and its symbolic embodiment that Browning, as the Maker-See, hopes to facilitate spiritual sight in his audience so that they too might perceive a relationship between the ideal and the real in the material world.

Ogniben's philosophical arguments throughout the second act about truth and its expression in political forms, and his transcendent sense of history, illustrate what Browning meant when he said he intended Ogniben to be “a man of wide speculation” who has a “universal understanding of men and sympathy with them”; however, in the final scene when Ogniben tells Chiappino that he must profess
allegiance to himself as the representative of Rome and give up the man who attacked the provost so that he can be brought to justice before he is able to confer the position of provost upon him, we are also privy to Ogniben's own historical, theological position—what Browning saw as his “narrow practice” and “professionally restricted claims for himself, for his own life.” It is at this moment that Luitolfo returns to confess his role in the attack against the provost and that we learn of Chiappino’s sudden escape from the city. Chiappino’s indecision at the moment of mounting the steps, and his final inability to act either in his new role as provost or as an arbiter of revolution, reveals the central tragedy of the man of insight who is unable to express his deep vision of soul into the action of the real world.

The critical consensus is that the tragic downfall of Browning’s protagonist, a “great mind and soul turning to ill,” is caused by Chiappino's original abandonment of his democratic goals, a conclusion determined by the fact that Chiappino's politics vacillate away from Browning's own self-proclaimed liberal politics; however, it is important to note that in A Soul's Tragedy, as in all of his plays, the emphasis is not placed on Browning's own commitment to a specific political cause but on the historical manifestation of noumenal soul. Thus the tragedy of Chiappino's soul, which is the very title of Browning’s play, is not that he lets down his republican stance; rather, the tragedy lies in the larger epistemological quandary that he faces when he sees that at this point in history, autocratic overthrow and the establishment of democratic rule does not constitute a viable form through which to symbolically express the truth of the age. Indeed, as Sordello surveys the progressive embodiment of soul throughout history as it is mirrored in increasing democratic action, he learns that the Church is a necessary step in the evolution of the absolute, and that one step of action before its allotted time effects no change: “If one step’s awry, one bulge /
Calls for correction by a step we thought / Got over long since, why, till that is wrought, / No progress!” (Sordello 5. ll. 230-33). In contrast to the historical moment of Strafford and King Victor and King Charles, the time period of A Soul’s Tragedy does not reveal autocratic rule to be a false form but rather in its earlier manifestation Browning presents it as a living expression of truth. Therefore, at this point in the symbolic movement of history, Chiappino’s idealism, which seeks to break with the Church, has no form through which to embody and realize his search for truth: it only results in an abstract idealism that cannot act in any way upon the world.

Browning's discussion of Shelley's political idealism in his Essay on Shelley serves to explicate further the philosophical problems that he had hoped to explore through the medium of politics in the play. In Browning's analysis of the youthful Shelley, he argues that Shelley's power to “see” and to “idealize,” his ability to perceive soul, was accompanied by his desire to “contrive” and to “realize” these truths in the material world. Indeed it is Browning's perception of Shelley's tragedy—of his space between the perception of the ideal and its embodiment in the real—that forms the prototype for so many of the protagonists of Browning's romantic dramas.

In the Essay, Browning argues that Shelley’s problem lay in that he always sought to realize in the world what he first idealized in his mind; Shelley's desire to realize meant that he always sought remedies for the wrongs that he perceived, and that because he felt so strongly about the falsities that he saw, he came to defend a specific set of actions to such an extent that they themselves began to represent the great principles, which meant that he attacked “various great principles” if they appeared incompatible with the specific remedies that he had proposed (295). Thus Shelley saw the Church as equivalent to Christianity and sexual oppression as the same as marriage. The key here for Browning is that Shelley does not see that since
material forms are always evolving to be the next expression of soul, what are now seen as false forms do not invalidate the inner idea that they once bodied forth. Browning agrees with Carlyle in his Lectures on Hero-Worship that the Church was indeed a living embodiment of Christianity until it became, as with all material forms, merely tradition, a semblance divorced form its inner reality, whereupon Protestantism and political democracy became the new symbolic manifestation.

Browning's inquiry into Shelley's political idealism gives insight into the foundation of Ogniben's philosophic discussions with Chiappino, in which he labors to convince the young revolutionary that Chiappino's ideals are not only compatible with his proposed remedy of revolution, but also with the very existing political structure that he has hitherto accused of being unjust. Yet this does not compromise Browning’s liberalism, as in the play it represents Browning's belief that the past forms of history should not be disregarded as false but merely as different manifestations of what is true, and that real vision requires us to separate the truth or principle from the specific form it takes in time. According to Browning, Shelley was gradually “leaving behind him this low practical dexterity, unable to keep up with his widening intellectual perception” so that: “Gradually he was raised above the contemplation of spots and the attempt at effacing them, to the great Abstract Light, and, through the discrepancy of creation, to the sufficiency of the First Cause. Gradually he was learning that the best way of removing abuses is to stand fast by truth. Truth is one, as they are manifold; and innumerable negative effects are produced by the holding up of one positive principle” (295).

This is the problem that the tragedy hinges upon in the play: for Browning, when soul is manifested in the realm of cause and effect, it is bodied forth in different material forms that are continually evolving throughout history. He argues that
Shelley was beginning to look through the multiplicity of forms to the perfection of the first cause; he was beginning to separate the noumenal truths that he perceived through his imagination from their specific embodiments in the phenomenal. This is important to Browning because it was his conviction that it is more damaging to fixate on soul in one particular form than it is to realize that contradictory manifestations of truth still partake of soul, which is why he can hold simultaneously that “Truth is one, as they are manifold” (295).

After Luitolfo returns and before Chiappino flees, he admits to Chiappino that although he does not fully understand his agreement with Ogniben, he can see that there “is some proof of your superior nature in this starting aside, strange as it seems at first” (2. ll. 637-8). Along with this confession, he reiterates the patience that he advocated to Chiappino in the first act: “I understand only the dull mule's way of standing stockishly, plodding soberly, suffering on occasion a blow or two with due patience” (2. ll. 641-4). Although Ogniben is dismissive of Luitolfo's return, he recognizes in Luitolfo's patient demeanor a future leader who might be able to reconcile his conception of the ideal within the complex realities of the world of forms. He exclaims to Luitolfo: “I understand it: it would be easy for you to die of remorse here on the spot and shock us all, but you mean to live and grow worthy of coming back to us one day” (2. ll. 657-60) It is this potential that Ogniben sees in Luitolfo that Eulalia realizes is the final vindication of her decision to choose Luitolfo over Chiappino: “I was determined to justify my choice, Chiappino,—to let Luitolfo's nature vindicate itself” (2. ll. 645-7). It is significant that the play ends on Ogniben's often repeated declaration that he has known four and twenty revolts, because it is he, like Browning, who knows that changes in the manifestations of soul are gradual and are usually effected through evolution and not revolution.
A Soul's Tragedy is Browning's most complicated play, and I would argue the most misunderstood. Confusion arises from two aspects of the play: the first is how Browning uses a political subject symbolically, and secondly from the ambiguous nature of Ogniben's character. Although Browning saw Ogniben as the moral center of the play, the fact that his philosophical arguments also serve his own agenda has led most critics to see him as a sophistical, dangerous figure. Although Elizabeth Barrett saw the play as something very new, and admired the power of its philosophical thought, especially in the second act, she admitted to feeling confused over Ogniben: “Your Ogniben (here is my only criticism in the ways of objection) seems to me almost too wise for a crafty worldling—tell me if he is not!” (12, 188-90). Her comments point to the common problem of reconciling the clarity and depth of Ogniben's philosophical thought with the fact that his arguments are also self-serving in that they ensure subservience to Rome's rule.

Browning himself was concerned that the play would be misunderstood. In a letter to his future wife, he expressed his reservations about publishing A Soul's Tragedy after Luria to close his series of Bells and Pomegranates because he was unsure that his readers would understand the “main drift of it”—the symbolic nature of the tragedy—and was concerned that they would miss the overall moral of the play:

Two nights ago I read the 'Soul's Tragedy' once more, and though there were not a few points which struck me as successful in design and execution, yet on the whole I came to a decided opinion, that it will be better to postpone the publication of it for the present. It is not a good ending, an auspicious wind-up of this series; subject-matter and style are alike unpopular even for the literary grex that stands aloof from the purer plebs, ...so that, if 'Luria' is clearish, the
'Tragedy' would be an unnecessary troubling of the waters. Whereas, if I printed it first in order, my readers, according to custom, would make the (comparatively) little they did not see into, a full excuse for shutting their eyes at the rest, and we may as well part friends, so as not to meet enemies. But, at bottom, I believe the proper objection is to the immediate, first effect of the whole—its moral effect—which is dependent on the contrary supposition of its being really understood, in the main drift of it. Yet I don't know; for I wrote it with the intention of producing the best of all effects—perhaps the truth is, that I am tired, rather, and desirous of getting done, and 'Luria' will answer my purpose so far. (12, 69-70)

Browning recognized that the philosophical subject matter and symbolic style would prove unpopular for readers. As the Maker-See, Browning wanted to facilitate spiritual sight in his readers, but he feared that even his more insightful readers might miss the deeper meaning of the symbolic plot embedded in A Soul’s Tragedy.

Browning was much more confident that Luria, the last play that he wrote before abandoning verse drama altogether, would be understood. Luria continues Browning's symbolic discussion of embodiment in A Soul’s Tragedy, but it also engages the question of epistemology and how embodiment is perceived, which is also the central symbolic predicament of the group of plays that I will discuss in the next chapter. In Luria, Browning presents the tension between Luria's Eastern nature and the Western Florentine army leaders as a symbolic exploration of the difference between feeling and fancy—the perception of the noumenal—and the reasoning faculty—the logical interpretation of the sensory perceptions of the world of cause and effect. This is crucial for Browning’s exploration into the tragedy of historical forms because it is feeling and the fancy that sees form as the embodiment of soul
whereas the intellect can only perceive the material in its empirical relations. This emphasis again on spiritual sight is significant because although Browning sees democracy as an inevitable and welcome part of the progressive manifestation of soul, he also asserts, in the same way that Elizabeth Barrett does in her discussion of poetry in Aurora Leigh, the enduring need for the individual poet—the Maker-See whose office it is to reveal the relationship between the ideal and the real.

As with A Soul’s Tragedy, Browning emphasizes the symbolic form of the play when he says that it is written in the “high fantastical style” (10, 233-6) and again when he explains in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett that “It is all in the long speeches—the action, proper, is in them—they are no descriptions or amplifications—but therein a drama of this kind, all the events, (and interest), take place in the minds of the actors” and he compares this to his method in Paracelsus (11, 306-12). It is important to note here that Browning is not talking about “mind” and interiority in terms of psychology, but, as he asserts in Sordello, mind in the romantic paradigm is the embodiment of soul in thought, which expresses the relationship between soul and its manifestation in act that comprises the inward/outward action of symbolic drama. As with A Soul’s Tragedy, Luria is historical but it is only loosely based on the fifteenth century animosity between Florence and Pisa, which provides the external framework in which Browning embeds his symbolic plot.

Critics have often pointed out that Luria is derivative of Shakespeare's Othello, but rather than being an unconscious imitation, as DeVane suggests, I would argue that Browning consciously rewrote Othello to convey his symbolic purpose in the play. In making Luria “a Moor of Othello's country” (10, 97-101), Browning takes up the issue of race as a means to explore the relationship between emotion and thought in his own day; yet, crucially, Browning's discussion of passion and reason no
longer refers conceptually to the Christian dichotomy between the sensual bodily nature of man and reason, which is the voice of God in man, but to the philosophical paradigms of idealism and empiricism. Luria's passion is the stamp of his Eastern nature, but his passion does not represent feeling in the empirical sense—which refers to subjective, experiential emotions—but rather feeling in the German Romantic sense, which, as Bonaparte has shown, means the intuition of something transcendent. If this distinction is missed, as it is by Lawrence Poston, who, reading Browning's political plays in the tradition of empiricism, views Luria as a conflict between emotion and reason, then the symbolic plot is missed in our analysis of the play.

Browning's symbolic concept of the East in Luria contrasts to Shakespeare's medieval view in that it does not conceive of the East as primitive in a savage or uncivilized way, but rather as being closer to the inner kernel of religious truth. It is true that Shakespeare only uses this dichotomy symbolically to convey the conflict between passion and reason; but for Shakespeare Eastern passion represents the fallible flesh, whereas for Browning Eastern feeling is that which apprehends soul. Luria's proximity to religious truth is spiritual rather than theological, which is reiterated by the fact that his actual creed is never discussed, whereas Othello is clearly demarcated as a Christian. Browning's reveals his spiritual concept of the East when Luria exclaims to Domizia that God is still immanent in that part of the world and that only in the East can man intuit God's divine presence:

My own East!
How nearer God we were! He glows above
With scarce an intervention, presses close
And palpitatingly, His soul o'er ours:
We feel him, nor by painful reason know!
The everlasting minute of creation

Is felt there; now it is, as it was then;

All changes at his instantaneous will,

Not by operation of a law

Whose maker is elsewhere at other work.

His hand is still engaged upon his world—. (5. ll. 228-38)

Luria, as a Moor, embodies the concept of feeling that can intuit the noumenal realm of soul. Significantly, Luria accesses the divine through intuition and not through the intellect: “We feel Him, nor by painful reason know!” Reason, which for Shakespeare is the voice of God in man, is conceived by Browning as the faculty that perceives and interacts with only the facts and observations of the material world, and he places this faculty symbolically in the West. Thus, just as the conceptual meanings of passion and feeling have been inverted, so have the implications of reason.

The central symbol of Browning's final play is of course Luria himself: on the level of the mimetic plot, he is a fully realized human character who is a noble military leader, a commander of the Florentine Forces; yet, in the symbolic plot of ideas, he is transcendent feeling and the intuition of the imagination, and like so many of Browning's protagonists, Luria seeks to embody the perceptions of his soul in the forms of the material realm. Domizia sees this desire in Luria and he is grateful to her that she has the vision to intuit the divine inner purpose of things:

And here stand you—you, lady, praise me well!

But yours—(your pardon)—is unlearned praise:

To the motive, the endeavour,—the heart's self,

Your quick sense looks: you crown and call aright

The soul o' the purpose, ere 'tis shaped as act,
Takes flesh i' the world, and clothes itself a king. (3. ll. 66-71)

Here Browning utilizes the symbolic language that he developed in Sordello, and takes from Carlyle, to show that Domizia sees the endeavour of romantic action to be the embodiment of soul. It is this manifestation that effects action in the material world that constitutes Carlyle’s king, the hero in his many different incarnations through time who acts upon a perception of the ideal. Indeed, as a Carlylian hero, Luria's importance is not only externally political but is internally spiritual.

Luria comes to the West, which as the intellect represents the material world in the play, so that he may embody the ideal in the real, reflecting Browning's belief that the divine must be known in the material world and not only through the self-consciousness of soul. An early image that Browning uses to show how Luria wants to bring the East and the West together, the ideal and the real, is in Luria's sketch for the new Duomo: Jacapo reports to Braccio that “Lady Domizia / Spoke of the unfinished Duomo, you remember; / That is his [Luria's] fancy how a Moorish front / Might join to, and complete, the body” (1. ll. 122-5). Luria knows that intuition—“the East's gift”—“Is quick and transient—comes, and lo, is gone— / While Northern thought is slow and durable” (5. ll. 243-5), and he explains how his mission to Italy was reserved for someone like him, “Who, born with a perception of the power / And use of the North's thought for us of the East, / Should have remained, turned knowledge to account, / Giving thought's character and permanence / To the too transitory feelings there—” (5. ll. 246-12). In another metaphor for symbolic embodiment, Luria exclaims that in coming to Florence, he wished to inscribe “God's message plain in mortal words” (5. l. 252).

Browning shows that in traveling West, Luria feels “a soul grow on me that restricts / The boundless unrest of the savage heart!” (1. ll. 323-4); however, rather
than being a taint of uncontrollable passion such as that which plagues Othello, Luria's quick feeling is the undulating essence of inner soul that, in yet another metaphor for embodiment, he compares to a wild sea that, curtailed by land, is finally channeled into narrower brooks—a popular metaphor for organic form:

The sea heaves up, hangs loaded o'er the land,
Breaks there and buries its tumultuous strength;
Horror, and silence, and a pause awhile:
Lo, inland glides the gulf-stream, miles away,
In rapture of assent, subdued and still,

'Neath those strange banks, those unimagined skies! (1. ll. 325-30)

Although Luria has noble intentions, the West—the province of the intellect—does not at first recognize Luria's fresh instinct. Hussain, a fellow Moor and friend of Luria, warns him: "I doubt and fear. There stands a wall / 'Twixt our expansive and explosive race / And those absorbing, concentrating men. / They use thee" (2. ll. 81-3). Here it is important to note that Browning is not suggesting an opposition between the Orient and the Orientalist, but rather an epistemological distinction between the explosive force of noumenal soul and the molding and fashioning of the intellect.

The mimetic plot follows the Italian response to Luria, as Braccio, the Commissary of the Republic of Florence, does not trust him despite the fact that he led Florence to a victory over Pisa. Braccio believes that Luria placed himself in a position of power that he will not want to relinquish after the end of the war; thus, he plans to betray Luria by accusing him of treason. Even Domizia, who has recognized Luria's nobility from the start, expects Luria to react vengefully against Florence and even wishes him to punish Florence, an act that she has been hoping for all along. Yet when Braccio confronts Luria about his suspicions, the symbolic nature of this dispute
is made clear: it is not just Luria as an army commander that Braccio disbelieves in but the concept of the Carlylian hero as well. Carlyle argues that when the “Ableman,” or hero, is found,” the man of insight who can act on soul, “he should be raised to the “supreme place” and loyally reverenced. Indeed “the Ablest Man; he means also the truest-hearted, justest, the Noblest Man: what he tells us to do must be precisely the wisest, fittest, that we could anywhere or anyhow learn” (123). Mocking Carlyle's idea of the hero, Braccio exclaims to Domizia and Luria:

Call any man the sole great wise and good!

But shall we therefore, standing by ourselves,

Insult our souls and God with the same speech?

There, swarm the ignoble thousands under Him:

What marks us from the hundreds and tens?

Florence took up, turned all one way the soul

Of Luria with its fires, and here he glows! (3. ll.220-26 )

Braccio refuses to believe that one soul could influence the people, arguing that Florence “binds so many, that she grows out of them—” (3. l.186). Reiterating that he will not “stake this permanence / On any one man's faith” (3. ll.201-2), in declaring to secretary, Lapo, that the intellect and not intuition will rule Florence: “Intellect / May rule her, bad or good as chance supplies: / But intellect it shall be, pure if bad, / And intellect's tradition so kept up / Till the good come” (1. ll. 190-4), Braccio refuses to recognize the province of feeling: “There, my Lapo! / A Moorish front ill suits our Duomo's body: / Blot it out—and bid Luria's sentence come” (1. ll. 209-11).

Perceving the purity of Luria's soul as it is reflected in his reverential love for Florence, Lapo assures Braccio “that man believes in Florence as the Saint / Tied to the wheel believes in God” (1. ll. 108-9). Lapo had earlier witnessed the extent of
Luria’s devotion to Florence as he was repairing the half-effaced Duomo: “while he spoke of Florence, turned [to the Duomo]/ As the Mage Negro King to Christ the Babe” (1. ll. 382-3). Even Puccio, who was displaced as commander by Luria, believes in his integrity, and he is reluctant to accept the position of commander when it is offered back to him because he knows the extent to which the troops revere Luria: “I want men, / The hearts as well as hands—and where's a heart / But beats with Luria, in the multitude” (4. ll. 29-31). Puccio desires a spiritual connection with his men as well as a temporal one, but he is beholden by his military duty to take the post although he feels in his heart the wrongs that have been committed against Luria. Despite taking his place, Puccio will always be reminded of how his “better nature, fresh-inspired, / Mounted above me to its proper place!” (4. ll. 77-78). Echoing Carlyle’s reverential attitude toward the hero, Puccio emphasizes that Luria’s transcendent significance makes him a symbol for men and that as such he should oversee the actions of himself and the army that he is supposed to lead.

Browning shows that Luria's mission to give form to his soul rests on his faith in Florence as a symbol. Consequently, when his noble and honest foe, Tiburzio, tries to tell Luria about Florence's treachery, he refuses to act on what he has discovered:

And act on what I read? What act were fit?
If the firm-fixed foundation of my faith
In Florence, who to me stands for Mankind
—if that break up and, disemprisoning
From the abyss...Ah friend, it cannot be. (2. ll. 240-4)

Without Florence, Luria has no symbol to mediate between the noumenal aspect of his inward soul and his outward actions in the world. In words that echo Othello's existential despair upon losing his faith in Desdemona, Luria laments the loss of
Florence: “Oh world, where all things pass and nought abides, / Oh life, the long
mutation—is it so?” (2. ll. 269-70). Without Florence, Luria fears formlessness and
chaos; yet this is not the biblical chaos before creation, but a romantic conception of
the amorphous, divine, inner soul of all and every creation. Thus, despite their deceit,
Luria decides that he must retain his belief in Florence and in the intellect:

Yes—when the desert creature's heart, at fault
Amid the scattering tempest's pillared sands,
Betrayed its steps into the pathless drift—
The clam instructed eye of man holds fast
By the sole bearing of the visible star,
Sure that when slow the whirling wreck subside,
The boundaries, lost now, shall be found again,—
The palm-trees and the pyramids over all.

Yes: I trust Florence: Pisa is deceived. (2. ll. 290-8)

Rather than be left adrift amongst the maelstrom of the desert sandstorm, Luria fixes
himself upon the symbol of Florence, his “visible star,” in order to give form to his
unbodied soul. Now that Luria is aware of the treacherous accusations of treason,
Puccio warns Braccio that he could turn his indignant troops against Florence or else
join the Pisan troops; but Luria knows that if he takes revenge, it would mean that “I
ruin Florence, teach her friends mistrust, / Confirm her enemies in harsh belief” (4. ll.
286-7). Rather than destroy Florence, the symbol that anchors him in the real, Luria
drinks a phial of poison, declaring that, “This was my happy triumph-morning:
Florence / Is saved: I drink this, and ere night,—die! Strange” (4. ll. 327-8).

Luria’s enduring loyalty to Florence is demonstrated when he still visits
Puccio after he has imbibed the fatal poison to give the new commander strategic
advice that will ensure the ultimate dominion of Florence against her enemies even though he knows they have betrayed him. Puccio is overwhelmed with gratitude that Luria has chosen to help him, which leads to a revelation about Luria's truth and nobility. Prostrating himself before Luria, Puccio cries:

I am yours now,—a tool your right-hand wields.

God's love, that I should live, the man I am,

On orders, warrants, patents and the like,

As if there were no glowing eye i' the world

To glance straight inspiration to my brain,

No glorious heart to give mine twice the beats!

For, see—my doubt, where is it?—fear? 't is flown! (5. ll. 99-105)

In a crucial symbolic moment in the play, Puccio realizes that up until knowing Luria, he has lived on “orders, warrants, patents,” or within the realm of language, reasoning and logic, whereas Luria’s “glowing eye”—his spiritual sight—and his “inspiration”—his divine feeling—has brought knowledge of soul to Puccio’s “brain,” which for Browning is the fashioning faculty. Browning states this view of the relationship between soul and mind definitively in a letter to Mrs. FitzGerald wherein he praises Schopenhauer’s concept of will and representation and compares it to his own foundational idealism. Writing about his striking affinity with the German philosopher, he exclaimed that he had always believed in the supremacy of soul which “is above and behind the intellect which is merely its servant” and that he had based his whole life upon this conviction (McAleer 34-5). It is important to note that Browning italicizes “behind” to place emphasis on his notion that the divine perceptions apprehended by the soul are embodied in thought, which mirrors the ideal foundation of reality for Browning. In the symbolic plot, Luria—as the soul of the
East—helps Puccio recognize that up until now he has lived merely in the material world without acting upon or acknowledging the noumenal realm.

Luria also brings about this crucial revelation in Domizia about the relationship between soul and its embodiment in forms. Following Puccio, Domizia recognizes that Luria has “brought fresh stuff / For us to mould, interpret and prove right, — / New feeling fresh from God, which, could we know / O’ the instant, where had been our need of it?” (5. ll. 263-6). Domizia realizes that it is Luria, as the man of insight and feeling, “whose life re-teaches us what life should be, / What faith is, loyalty and simpleness” (5. ll.267-8), and who reveals that the forms, symbolized by the West, are no longer the organic embodiment of truth:

All, once revealed but taught us so long since
That, having mere tradition of the fact,—
Truth copied falteringly from copies faint,
The early traits all dropped away,—we said
On sight of faith like yours, “So looks not faith
We understand, described and praised before. (5. ll. 269-74)

In this very abstract passage, Browning is discussing the embodiment of the noumenal in the forms of the material world: these symbols are “Truth copied falteringly from copies faint” —they are derived from the material, which is itself a manifestation of soul that can only ever be partial in time and space. For Browning, like Carlyle, tradition refers to those forms that overtime are divorced from their essential content, which requires the hero, who has the divine sight into the true reality that informs empirical phenomena, to reveal this discrepancy. Through Luria, “trace by trace / Old memories reappear, old truth returns, / Our slow thought does its work, and all's reknown / Oh, noble Luria!” (5. ll. 276-9). His “feeling fresh from God” has brought
back what Carlyle sees as the desired “veracity, a natural spontaneity in forms” (129)—the vital connection between the transcendent and its embodiment in the real.

Tiburzio also proclaims the magnetic influence that Luria has had on him and valorizes the need of the individual spiritual hero that Braccio had fervently rallied against: “A people is but the attempt of many / To rise to the completer life of one; / And those who live as models for the mass / Are singly of more value than they all. / Such a man are you, and such a time is this, / That your sole fate concerns a nation more / Than much apparent welfare” (5. ll. 299-305). Thus the symbolic significance in Luria lies in the fact that he is a Maker-See poet. While Browning views the teleological manifestation of soul in history as comprising a greater awareness of wider humanity that takes the form of democratic action, he also emphasizes the need at all times throughout history for the Maker-See, the individual who might act less in the real world but whose function is to reveal the relationship between the ideal and the real. Indeed, Browning uses Domizia’s exact phrase “tradition of a fact” when he says in his Essay on Shelley that there is a need for a new poet when “the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year’s harvest” (286). Tiburzio reiterates Browning’s conviction about the role of the poet in facilitating the transition from old to new forms when he implores Luria not to leave but to “keep but God's model safe, new men will rise / To take its mould, and other days to prove / How great a good was Luria's glory” (5. ll. 309-11).

Luria is astonished at the reversal of his fortune and looks to Braccio, who has been his staunchest foe, for a final confirmation of his redemption. In begging for Luria's forgiveness, Braccio acknowledges “His lapse to error, his return to knowledge” (5. l. 322)—a different kind of knowledge that can perceive spiritual
truth—and the need for the man of insight in illuminating this distinction. Declaring
the grandeur and glory of Luria's future, Braccio calls on him to speak, but Luria has
already fallen down dead. Similarly to Puccio and Domizia, Braccio’s revelation has
come too late to save Luria. Although Elizabeth Barrett praised *Luria*, she did not
agree with Luria's death and what she perceived as Luria’s unheroic suicide.
Browning, however, explained that Luria's decision to take his own life is driven by
his need to uphold Florence as a symbol, in the same way that Strafford dies for the
king:

Observe only, that Luria *would* stand, if I have plied him effectually with
adverse influences, in such a position as to render any other end impossible
without the hurt to Florence which his religion is, to avoid inflicting—passively
awaiting, for instance, the sentence and punishment to come at night, would as
surely inflict it as taking part with her foes. His aim is to prevent the harm she
will do herself by striking him, so he moves aside from the blow.

When Browning says that Florence is Luria's religion, he intends a Carlylian
conception of religion— not the theological beliefs of a particular creed, but in the
way in which mankind feels himself to be spiritually related to the noumenal realm.
Browning explains that as Luria's religion, Florence is a symbol that mediates
between the transcendent realm of soul and its manifestation in the real world and that
he dies in order to retain its vital connection.

Elizabeth had also hoped for a more developed role for Domizia, and although
Browning had wanted to grant her wishes by developing Domizia's feelings for Luria,
he felt that ultimately her role had fulfilled his symbolic design: “I meant to make her
leave off her own projects through love of Luria. As it is, they in a manner fulfil
themselves, so far as she has any power over them, and then, she being left
unemployed, sees Luria, begins to see him, having hitherto seen only her own ends which he was to further.” Indeed, the ability to see Luria is the meaning behind the play's tragedy. Browning’s romantic irony lies in the fact that Luria's comrades, and the intellectual faculty that they represent, have realized too late the nature and means of their spiritual salvation, but it is precisely through the tragedy of Luria's suicide that Browning as a Maker-See awakens them and the reader to the soul that girds the material world. Indeed, Elizabeth recognized this as the symbolic meaning of the play when she wrote to Browning praising Luria as: “a magnificent work—a noble exposition of the ingratitude of men against their 'heroes,' and (what is peculiar) an humane exposition ... not misanthropical, after the usual fashion of such things: for the return, the remorse, saves it—and the 'Too late' of the repentance and compensation covers with its solemn toll the fate of persecutors and victim” (12, 57-60). She saw that the tragedy did not reflect a skepticism on Browning's part regarding Luria as a hero, which she place in quotation marks to emphasize its Carlylian symbolic meaning, but rather that his demise served as the final recognition of his spiritual significance that comprised the meaning of the play.

Browning was right in his prediction that A Soul’s’ Tragedy would prove to be unpopular as it was barely noted by critics in the reviews of the final instalment of Bells and Pomegranates. Luria received praise, but it confirmed for the reviewers that Browning’s plays were too symbolic and philosophical to be rendered on the contemporary stage. Indeed, The New Monthly Belle Assemblée observed that as “an heroic production,” Browning’s last verse drama was a:

- beautiful truth idealized; a creation that could only have emanated from a mind accustomed to find its daily food in the noblest aspirations of humanity. We do not apprehend this drama was ever intended for theatrical representation,
although we can understand how actors of genius might in its embodiment
delight a cultivated and sympathising audience; but it possesses none of the
claptrap effects and bustling activity which are necessary to please the general
taste, lowered and corrupted as it has been by the greedy seekers of an
evanescence popularity. (13, 395-7)

In their review of Luria, Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine argued that the modern
degradation of the theater meant that: “The theatre and Mr. Browning’s dramas are
never likely to come in contact; not at all events until, as in the early days of our true
drama, the most refined minds, and therefore the comparatively few, again visit the
playhouse as a place to study nature and philosophy. The high drama was always
played in its entirety, and always must be, to the reflecting few” (13, 393-4). In The
Examiner, John Forster complimented Luria “This is writing of no ordinary kind,”
but he noted “if Mr. Browning’s tone of treatment were simpler, less remote, less
abstrusely metaphysical, the stage would in him have found its noblest supporter in
these latter days” (12, 384-7). Both the praise and criticisms that Browning received
regarding his historical plays testify to the fact that he was writing philosophic and
symbolic drama, which, although perceived to be unsuitable for the stage, has far
reaching implications for our interpretation of drama and the symbolic method.
Chapter Four
The Irony of Love: Forms of Knowledge in The Return of the Druses, A Blot in the 'Scutcheon and Colombe's Birthday

While Browning’s history plays explore the relationship of history to the romantic, symbolic mode, he turns to the concept of love in his other plays to express the idea of symbolic embodiment. In Browning’s poetic study of the classical and the romantic paradigms in Sordello, the narrator asks how it is that the Greeks, who perfected the fusion of spirit and form, can truly love, a question which can be explained by Browning's conviction that love connects mankind with the noumenal aspect of the world that transcends material reality. Friedrich and August Schlegel argue that the vital combination of Northern heroism and Christianity created the concept of chivalric love, an internally driven feeling that embodies the desire for and reverence of a higher power that they see as the definition of the romantic age. Thus Friedrich Schlegel argues that romantic art always evokes spiritual feeling, and that “the source and soul of these emotions is love, and the spirit of love must hover everywhere invisibly visible in romantic poetry” (99). This also becomes a question of epistemology for Schlegel in that “it cannot be grasped forcefully and comprehended mechanically” (99) by the logical faculties of the intellect, but “only the imagination can grasp the mystery of this love and present it as a mystery” (100). Therefore, in the endeavor to reveal the inward spiritual meaning of the external material realm, love is central to the new mythology of the objective poet as to love is to see the material as “a hint of something higher, the infinite, a hieroglyph of the one eternal love and the sacred fullness of life of creative nature” (100). Love in the romantic paradigm reveals the real to be a symbol that bodies forth the ideal.
Browning conceives of love in this religious and philosophic sense as the vehicle through which mankind feels connected to the deeper noumenal reality that underlies the phenomenal world. The love of God is also central to Browning’s concept of symbolic embodiment in that the Incarnation of Christ, the expression of divine love in the material realm, symbolizes the aspect of God that is intelligible to man; therefore, human love is the expression of the infinite love of God. Yet, as the mediator between human and divine, the real and the ideal, love also comprises the space of romantic irony. The misapprehension of love as belonging to solely the physical or spiritual realm becomes the site of Browning’s irony in *The Return of the Druses* and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, and as in *Luria*, the epistemological nature of these earlier tragedies is compressed more abstractly in his final examination of the same subject in *Colombe’s Birthday* where Colombe’s two suitors, Berthold and Valence, juxtapose the faculties of mind and imagination. In Browning’s only comedy, he presents the relationship between love and symbolic embodiment, which he also hoped to elucidate through the tragic irony of his earlier plays.

Browning first mentions love as the central theme of *The Return of the Druses* (1843) as early as 1837 in a letter to Miss Haworth when he professes his intention to embark upon “a subject of the most wild and passionate love, to contrast with the one I mean to have ready in a short time [King Victor and King Charles]” (3, 255-8). He writes that he already has had “many half-conceptions, floating fancies” about a suitable subject for his play, but he ponders “what circumstances will best draw out, set forth this feeling?” (3, 255-8). Finally, Browning settled upon the religious tenets of the Druses to symbolically explicate his philosophic exploration of love in the play: the Druses' belief in the one ineffable God who manifests Himself in successive incarnations, the last of which was Hakem-Biamr-Allah the Third Fatemite Caliph,
brings the concept of embodiment to the forefront of the play and conveys the irony that arises from a love that belongs to and yet transcends the embodied world.

In *The Return of the Druses*, both the realistic action of the empirical plot and the embodied ideas of the symbolic plot unfold from the deception of Browning's protagonist, Djabal, who has falsely professed to be the reincarnation of the Hakeem. Djabal feels guilty about his dissimulation, but he tries to assuage his feelings by thinking of his lifelong quest to help the Druses. After traveling the world to seek allies for his tribe, he asks “could I call / My mission aught but Hakeem's? Promised Hakeem / More than performs the Djabal—you absolve?” (2. ll. 53-55). Djabal's close friend, Khalil, explains to Karshook, a fellow Druse, that without Djabal, the Druses' tribe would remain subject to the Christian Knights of Rhodes who have kept them in bondage under the authority of a corrupt prefect ever since they fled from Lebanon and sought their help in escaping the reach of the Ottoman Empire. Although one knight, Loys of Bretagne, pledges to fight their cause, Djabal plans to kill the tyrannical prefect so that his people can leave captivity and return to Lebanon on the Venetian ships that he has secured.

In the opening speech of Act One, Khalil declares that when Djabal kills the prefect he will finally be “exalted” and transformed into their old leader who is the incarnation of God:

The moon is carried off in purple fire:

Day breaks at last! Break glory, with the day,

*On Djabal's dread incarnate mystery*

*Now ready to resume its pristine shape*

Of Hakeem, as the Khalif vanished erst

*In what seemed death to uninstructed eyes,*
On red Mokattam's verge—our Founder's flesh,
As he resumes our Founder's function! (1. ll. 1-8)

In the 1863 edition of his works, Browning added several lines (my italics) to further emphasize that although Djabal is the manifestation of Hakeem—his “dread incarnate mystery,” he will dispense with his human form when he is exalted “to resume its pristine shape” as God, and only then will he be able to lead his people back to Lebanon. The return to Lebanon is a key detail in the explication of Browning’s symbolic plot. In his seminal work *Natural Supernaturalism*, M. H Abrams argues that even though the concept of the Fall was no longer a theological actuality for the Romantics, they used the Christian narrative of returning to Eden as a symbolic language to convey their quest to transcend the material realm. Similarly, Browning configures Lebanon symbolically as a quest to return to the ideal.

Khalil explains to Karshook that after Djabal has killed the prefect, he will cast off his human body to reveal the divine:

As I approach him, nearer as I trust
Soon to approach our Master, he reveals
Only the God's power, not the glory yet.
Therefore I reasoned with you: now, as a servant
To Djabal, bearing his authority,
Hear me appoint your several posts! Till noon
None see him save myself and Anael: once
The deed achieved, our Khalif, casting off
The embodied Awe's tremendous *mystery*,

*The weakness of the flesh disguise, resumes*

*His proper glory, ne'er to fade again.*” (1. ll. 186-96)
Browning reiterates in the appended lines (my italics) that Djabal must relinquish the fallible flesh—embodiment—in order to reclaim the glory of the ideal. Indeed, utilizing Browning’s symbolic language for the two aspects of the world, Khalil exclaims that Djabal's physical self is only “the man in semblance” but that mystical “signs and portents” have revealed him to be their God (1. ll. 134-6). Here Browning changed “our Khalif” to “our God” to further emphasize that he is using the Druses' belief that the Hakeem is God made manifest to express symbolically the tension between the real (Djabal, or the condition of embodiment) and the ideal (the Hakeem, or God) that comprises the philosophical irony in the play.

Despite the fact that Djabal has dedicated his life to freeing the Druses, he is still plagued by his deceit, especially to Anael, the beautiful Druse woman he loves who is to become his bride after he is exalted. The import of Djabal's identity as the Hakeem for his relationship with Anael becomes another site of romantic irony in the play since Djabal mistakenly believes that Anael cannot love him unless he transcends his physical being to become the divine Hakeem, while, in turn, the emotions that Anael takes to be evoked by his divinity are actually inspired by the love she feels for him as a human being. When Anael ponders Djabal's forthcoming exaltation, she asks her mother, “What will be changed in Djabal when the / Change arrives? Which feature? ” and laments the inevitable loss of the human features that originally inspired the reverence that she feels for him:

Not his eyes! His voice perhaps?
Yet that's no change; for a grave current lived
— Grandly beneath the surface ever lived,
That, scattering, broke as in live silver spray
While … ah, the bliss... he would discourse to me
In that enforced still fashion, word on word!

'T is the old current which must swell thro' that,

For what least tone, Maani, could I lose?

'T is surely not his voice will change!

Contemplating Djabal's transformation into the Hakeem, Anael wonders what of Djabal will remain, and asks “—If Hakeem / Only stood by! If Djabal, somehow, passed / Out of radiance as from out a robe; Possessed, but was not it!” (2. ll. 189-204). In this metaphor, Anael configures the glory of Hakeem as a robe that Djabal might wear while remaining intrinsically himself; whereas for Khalil, Djabal's human form is the semblance or clothing that he must cast off in order to reveal the true reality of his divinity, it is Djabal's humanity that is the truth for Anael: “For never seem you—shall I speak the truth? — / Never a God to me! 'T is the Man's hand, / Eye, voice! Oh do you veil these to our people, / Or but to me? To them, I think, to them! / And brightness is their veil, shadow—my truth!” (2. ll. 259-3).

Anael questions whether the effect that Djabal's physical presence has on her, which she had taken as proof of his divinity, might actually be inspired in others by any human being. She confesses in an aside that when she first heard his voice:

My faith fell, and the woful thought flashed first
That each effect of Djabal's presence, taken
For proof of more than human attributes
In him, by me whose heart at his approach
Beat fast, whose brain while he was by swam round,
Whose soul at his departure died away,
—That every such effect might have been wrought
In other frames, tho' not in mine, by Loys
Anael's feelings for Djabal raise doubts in her mind as to whether he can truly be the
divine Hakeem, revealing her perceived distinction that the human and divine realms
are separate. Directly juxtaposed with Anael's monologue is an aside by Djabal that
highlights how the central irony of the play lies in their critical miscommunication
around his divinity:

Avow the truth? I cannot! In what words
Avow that all she loved in me was false?
--Which yet has served that flower-like love of hers
To climb by, like the clinging gourd, and clasp
With its divinest wealth of leaf and bloom.
Could I take down the prop-work, in itself
So vile, yet interlaced and overlaid
With painted cups and fruitage—might these still
Bask in the sun, unconscious their own strength
Of matted stalk and tendril had replaced
The old support thus silently withdrawn!
But no; the beauteous fabric crushes too. (2. ll. 285-96)

Djabal believes that his ostensible divinity is the “prop-work,” the stalks and the vines
of the plant, which have enabled Anael's love to grow, and he fears that if he were to
take away this false foundation, the fruit that it is inextricably bound with it would be
fatally compromised as well. Furthermore, Djabal thinks that it is only through
Anael's union with him as the Hakeem that she herself can reach the divine, and thus
he declares that he must continue with the ruse so that Anael will be transcended with
him: “Djabal disappears, / And Hakeem, Anael loved, shall, fresh as first, / Live in
her memory, keeping her sublime above the world / She cannot touch that world/ By ever knowing what I truly am” (2. ll. 313-17). At this point in Browning's play, Djabal, unlike the audience/reader, has not realized that Anael's love for him is actually rooted in his humanity rather than in his professed divinity; likewise, Aneal has not yet realized that Djabal's divinity has been inherent in his humanity all along. Together, they do not know that they have already been exalted through their human love for each other.

The tragic misunderstanding, which carries Browning's philosophic point, is nearly resolved when Anael greets Djabal by declaring that her love belongs to him, “Djabal, I am thine!” This salutation gives Djabal the hope that he has been mistaken in his view of their relationship: “Mine? Djabal's?—As if Hakeem had not been?” (3. ll. 85-8). Anael follows his question by asking whether Djabal can read her thoughts, and when he says that he cannot, she begins to profess her feelings to him; however, rather than addressing her previous confusion, Anael placates her earlier doubts by expressing the conviction that she had perceived Djabal's divinity in the overwhelming happiness and completion that she felt from the very first time that she saw him. She goes on to reveal that she was fearful of the intensity of her feelings for him because she foresaw that it would come between her and her devotion to the cause of the Druses, which is why she made her vow to only marry the one who saved her tribe. At this point, in a moment of illumination, Djabal is finally able to see that Anael loved him, not as Hakeem, but first and foremost for himself: “And she loved me! Naught remained but that!” (3. l. 109). As his mistake dawns on him, Djabal decides that he must leave; however, the irony persists in that Anael misconstrues his response, believing that he thinks her unworthy of him. Consequently, Anael decides that she must commit an act that will testify to her love and faith in Djabal as the
Hakeem and pledges to kill the prefect in his place.

It is only when Anael tells Djabal what she has done for him that he finally feels compelled to admit his deception. In his confession to Anael, Djabal voices his hope that he can find a way to reach truth upon the basis of a false foundation: “The past / Is past: my false life shall henceforth show true. / Hear me!” (4. ll. 118-9). He implores Anael to consider the possibility that they can still find truth by imitating an old form of faith:

What if we reign together? --if we keep
Our secret for the druses' good? --by means
Of even their superstition, plant in them
New life? I learn from Europe: all who seek
Man's good must awe man, by such means as these.
We two will be divine to them—we are!
All great works in this world spring from the ruins
Of greater projects—ever, on our earth,
Babels men block out, Babylon's they build.” (4. ll. 118-30)

As Browning's plays were conceived of together, the ideas that he explores in them build upon each other within and across the plays, and thus can only be fully explicated when analyzed together. Therefore the symbolic significance of Djabal's argument to Anael is rendered clearer when we compare it with the development and iteration of similar ideas in the later plays, *A Soul's Tragedy* and *Luria*. In a similar manner to Chiappino, Djabal argues that in pretending to be the Hakeem, he is trying to infuse soul into old forms of the Druses religion—their “superstition” that emphasizes the empirical reality of miracles and the literal return of their original leader—so that they may embody truth once again. Like Chiappino, Djabal uses an
architectural metaphor to explain his intention of building a new edifice, or a fresh expression of truth, on the foundation or “ruins” of old forms.

When Anael leaves in disgust, Djabal continues to justify his deception to himself: “Has Europe then so poorly tamed / The Syrian blood from out thee? Thou, presume / To work in this foul earth by means not foul? / Scheme, as for heaven, — but, on the earth, be glad / If at least ray like heaven's be left thee” (4. ll. 142-6).

Again the symbolic significance of this statement could easily be missed if we did not compare Browning's concept of the East and the West in *The Return of the Druses* with its full symbolic development in *Luria*. As in *Luria*, the East—Djabal's “Syrian blood”—symbolizes the intuitive or imaginative perception of the noumenal whereas the West—Djabal's European “Frank policy” and “Frank brain”—represents the intellectual perception of the embodied forms of the material realm. Djabal's “Frank brain” chastises his “Arab heart” for believing that he could find soul while operating in the real world, which leads him to concede that it is not feasible, “To work in this foul earth by means not foul.” This has epistemological significance for Browning as Djabal’s “Frank brain”—his fashioning faculty—is necessarily skeptical because it can only see the limits of the empirical realm while it is his “Arab heart” that intuits the ideal. Djabal’s “Frank brain” triumphs over his intuitive faculties at this moment, which leads him to decide that he has no choice but to continue with his plan; however, when Anael betrays Djabal and tells the Nuncio that he is not really the Hakeem, he has an epiphany that is crucial to the symbolic meaning of the play:

I with my Arab instinct, thwarted everywhere

By my Frank policy, —and with, in turn,

My Frank brain, thwarted by my Arab heart—

While these remained in equipoise, I lived
– Nothing; had either been predominant,

As a Frank schemer or an Arab mystic,

I had been something;—now, each has destroyed

The other—and behold, from out of their crash,

A third and better nature rises up—

My mere man's-nature! And I yield to it! (5. ll. 270-279)

Djabal contrasts the reach of the intellect (symbolized by his Western “Frank policy,” “Frank brain,” and his being “a Frank schemer”) and the scope of the imagination (symbolized by his “Arab instinct,” “Arab heart,” and his being “an Arab mystic”) to show that his divided focus on the ideal and the real held each other in abeyance and effectively canceled each other out. It is only in their symbolic collision that he finally realizes that it is within his own humanity—“My mere man's-nature” — that the embodiment of the divine can be found. Browning uses the central tenet of the Druses' faith—the idea that God is made manifest—to show how it comprises a pattern that gives meaning to all of human embodiment.

Indeed, it is through this epiphany that Browning’s exploration of the irony of love and the concept of symbolic embodiment come together in the play: Djabal realizes that he can truly conceive of himself as the Hakeem—the manifestation of the ideal—because he has been transcended through Aneal's love and recognition of him as a fallible human rather than as a God, and in turn, when Aneal sees that Djabal has been exalted by means of her love, she is finally able to perceive in his very human nature the embodiment of the ideal that she, along with her people, had only reserved for the mythical and transcendent Hakeem. In his analysis of the play, Ryals argues that although Browning stated that he wished to explore love in The Return of the Druses, he actually only focuses on the “psychopathology of love” whereby Anael
has to accept that it is only romantic passion that she feels for Djabal (175). However, this psychological reading misses the philosophical irony in the play. Significantly, when Anael cries out “Hakeem” and falls down dead, it is the culminating symbolic moment in the play—as it is in all of Browning's plays—because she has perceived a central truth, which is the realization that mankind partakes of the divine through human love. Yet the symbolic significance of Anael's death can easily be missed if we look for causal explanations in the play. Indeed, looking for an empirical explanation for Anael's demise, the reviewer for *The Athanaeum* remarks: “why, or by what instrument, she dies, is no way explained,” which leads them to conclude that “the catastrophe is managed in a manner bungling and obscure” (7, 399-401).

Charlotte Porter and Helen Clarke recognize the symbolic import of Browning's treatment of the Druses in the play. They assert that Browning's discussion of the figure of Hakeem allows him to explore the idea of the Christian Incarnation: through Djabal and Anael, he resolves the conflict between a skeptical view of the Incarnation and one of sincere belief, in a similar way to the voices of David, Renan and the third speaker in the “Epilogue” to *Dramatis Personae*. According to Porter and Clarke, Anael and Djabal realize that “instead of their cruder belief or their awakened disbelief of any present efficacy and truth in an energy of loving deity, lost now in the the deeps of a doubtful past, the presence of that energy was reaffirmed within themselves” (xvii). Indeed, Browning draws the analogy between Christianity and his symbolic treatment of the Druses in the play to show what he perceives to be the true spirit of Christianity, which is love. The Incarnation for Browning is the act, or manifestation, of God's love in the phenomenal realm, and it is through love in the real world that man can perceive his relation to the divine. This is the conceptual function of the noble and faithful knight, Loys, in the play.
When Loys declares that he is sublimated through his feelings for Anael, Browning shows that it is his true Christian perception of love, and not the vows that he pledges to his chapter, that makes him a true knight or one of Bowning's “soldier-saints”:

Alas, say nothing of myself, who am
A Knight now, for when Knighthood we embrace,
Love we abjure: so, speak on safely: speak,
Lest I speak, and betray my faith! And yet
To say your breathing passes through me, changes
My blood to spirit, and my spirit to you,
As Heaven the sacrificer's wine to it— . (3. ll. 7-14)

Loys avows that it is through his physical love for Anael that he reaches the divine: his feelings transform his blood (passion) into spirit in the same way that he experiences heaven by partaking of the blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Through his love for Anael and his admiration for Djabal and the Druses, Loys continually fights against institutional Christianity and the corruption that is exemplified in the prefect and in the prefect's Nuncio as they try to turn the Druses against Djabal.

When the Nuncio arrives after the murder of the prefect, he endeavors to expose Djabal's fraud to the Druses and he challenges Djabal to prove that he is truly the Hakeem by discarding his human form in order to reveal himself as God:

Look to your Khalif, Druses! Is that face
God Hakeem's? Where is triumph,—where is ...what
Said he of exaltation— hath he promised
So much to-day? / Why then, exalt thyself!
Cast off that husk, thy form, set free thy soul
In splendour! … (5. ll. 328-33)
Here Browning uses the Druses' belief that only a special class is permitted to be initiated into the deeper and secret mysteries of the religion to serve his symbolic purpose in the play as it is the uninstructed Druses that listen to the Nuncio and ask Djabal to “cast off that husk”—his embodied form—to reveal himself as God. They cry: “show us all the glory!” (5. l. 127), “Exalt thyself! Exalt thyself, O Hakeem!” (5. ll. 336). Yet just as Djabal is about to confess his deception, Browning's stage directions tell us that when he looks upon his people, “the old dream comes back, he is again confident and inspired.” In asking “— Am I not Hakeem?” Djabal realizes that he has embodied the transcendent in his human striving for truth. Criticizing the Druses for their primitive need to witness the literal miracle of the reincarnated Hakeem: “Not grand enough / — What more could be conceded to such beasts / As all of you, so sunk and base as you, / Than a mere man? A man among such beasts was miracle enough” (5. ll. 341-5), Djabal avows to his people that they do not need the reincarnated Hakeem in order to know the divine.

Djabal informs the Druses that it is Khalil and Loys—men of truth and soul—who will take their people back to Lebanon. Browning’s use of language here is again important as it is through the intuitive faculties that the Druses will return to Lebanon, the transcendent realm, which is “Out of mere mortal ken—above the cedars” (5. l. 353). Turning to Anael's lifeless body, Djabal avers that she has won the greatest exaltation of all, and he stabs himself so that he may join her in the ideal:

And last to thee!

Ah, did I dream I was to have, this day,

Exalted thee? A vain dream: hast not thou

Won greater exaltation? What remains

But press to thee, exalt myself to thee?
Thus I exalt myself, set free my soul” (5. 386-391).

Djabal last dying words, where he calls upon the Druses to start the journey home, are symbolically significant because they reveal that love is the route to the divine. He shows the uninstructed Druses that they do not need to see the old miracles to reveal God because the true miracle is love, which is the act, or embodiment, of God in the world— an idea that Browning will return to in “A Death in the Desert.” Indeed, earlier in the play when Djabal admits his fraud to Anael, he confesses that when “I saw my tribe: I said, 'Without / A miracle this cannot be' —I said / 'Be thee a miracle!' — for I saw you (4. ll 60). For Browning, it is God's divine love that is made manifest in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ—in embodiment—and it is through human love that man can intuit God and the divine realm. Thus in The Return of the Druses, love itself acts as the symbolic mediation between the ideal and the real that comprises romantic drama, and the romantic irony that is expressed in this dialectic brings about a perception in Djabal and Anael, and in the audience/reader, whereby they see that they do not need to be part of the “initiated” to experience the mysteries of the divine since love allows all of humankind to transcend the material realm.

Browning composed The Return of the Druses with a view to performance, but Macready criticized it for being a “mystical, strange and heavy play” (80). When Browning went ahead and published The Return of the Druses in Bells and Pomegranates IV (1843), it did not elicit much critical attention; however, what criticism it did receive points again to the difficulty of bringing the mimetic and symbolic together without compromising either of them. While Browning did seek to create fully realized characters, as the embodiment of ideas they tend to be far more abstract than a realistic play would expect. Indeed, looking for verisimilitude, The Spectator objected to what they perceived to be a lack of reality in the characters,
accusing the actors of being “mere phantasmagoria, *talking Browning*” (6, 392). Thus after Macready rejected *The Return of the Druses* in 1840, Browning set to work on *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, which was a play that Browning felt would finally succeed in reconciling his notion of drama, the romantic, symbolic mode, with Macready's more popular, melodramatic demands for the stage. In a letter to Macready, he exclaimed:

'The luck of the third adventure' is proverbial. I have written a spick and span new Tragedy (a sort of compromise between my own notion and yours — as I understand it, at least) and will send it to you if you care to be bothered so far. There is action in it, drabbing, stabbing, *et autres gentillesses*, — who knows but the Gods may make me good even yet? (4, 293-4)

In *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, Browning rewrites the conceptual focus of *The Return of the Druses*, but he picks a temporal plot that he hoped would lend his play a more popular appeal; however, this endeavor to find a story that would appeal to a wider audience is the reason why *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is his one of his weakest and most criticized plays. Indeed, the survival of the manuscript, which records Macready's suggested emendations, illuminates the difficulty that Browning found when he tried to reconcile his aims for symbolic drama with the demands of the stage.

The mimetic and symbolic plot of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* revolves around Lord Tresham's proposal to marry his sister, Mildred, to the Earl, Henry Mertoun, and his shocking discovery that they have already been in a clandestine relationship with each other. In *the Early Literary Career of Robert Browning*, Thomas Lounsbury's analysis of this central plot line evinces the confusion and the very different interpretation that can ensue from reading Browning's plays as dramas that strive solely for verisimilitude. Lounsbury criticizes Browning’s failure to mimetically
represent real life because he sees the psychological motives of Mildred and Mertoun as unrealistic. Thus he asks why Browning's hero did not court “the heroine in the way of honourable marriage as he is represented as doing at the time the play opens” and he queries why Mildred would “cast aside maidenly reserve and virginal modesty on a slight pretext?” (135). Lounsbury is right that the motives of Browning's protagonists are unconvincing, but this is only the case if we interpret them as belonging solely to a mimetic plot that is governed by cause and effect rather than as the embodiment of ideas.

The fact that Mildred and Mertoun have already enjoyed a physical relationship before Lord Tresham arranges their marriage purposely sets up the central romantic irony in the play. Browning's idea of love, as it is for the Schlegels, is derived ultimately from Plato and the Christian concept of love espoused by John in his First Epistle, wherein love is seen as the way that the real, or human, partakes of the ideal, or the divine. Moreover, as love is perceived as the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal, this mystical union incorporates the physical and sexual as well, which is emphasized by Friedrich Schegel in his verse novel Lucinde and by Shelley in his Epipsychidion. In the context of Browning's romanticism, it is clear that A Blot in the 'Scutcheon is not his moral condemnation of Mildred and Mertoun's relationship; rather, the perceived tension between the sensual and the spiritual symbolizes the productive space between the ideal and the real that constitutes romantic irony in the play. Since marriage in A Blot in the 'Scutcheon is presented as a social contract, Mildred is not conceived by Browning as a sinful fallen woman as a realistic reading of the play might suggest because Browning's symbolic plot reveals that Mildred and Mertoun's physical love is already the marriage of souls. Indeed, as it is made clear in Browning's depiction of love and marriage in “The Statue and the
Bust,” he does not consider himself beholden to any prevailing moral scheme; the revelations of romantic drama are not moral truths, which are constructed by society, but rather ideal truths: “Not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato” (*Essay on Shelley* 283).

Where the return to Lebanon is symbolic of the return to the ideal in *The Return of the Druses*, Browning, like the Romantics before him, uses Biblical imagery of Eden and of the Fall of Man in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* to express his point that “evil,” as J. Hillis Miller has shown, consists of anything that is not the totality of God, or in other words is embodied. Browning, however, shows through Mildred's misapprehension of her relationship to the divine that all “evil” points back to the divine cause. Mildred mistakenly believes that in the physical manifestation of her love for Mertoun she has re-enacted the original Fall and that she has lost her connection to transcendent truth. When Mildred hears Mertoun's song outside of her window, she asks, “Oh why, why glided sin the snake / Into paradise Heaven meant us both?” (1. 3. ll. 79-80), and when she thinks about facing her brother after she is ostensibly introduced to Mertoun, she exclaims, “I'll not affect a grace / That's gone from me—gone once, and gone forever” (1. 3. ll. 153-4). Moreover, when Mildred and Mertoun's secret is finally revealed, Mildred declares to Austin and Guendolen, “I—I was so young! / Beside, I loved him, Thorold and I had / No mother; God forgot me: so, I fell” (2. ll. 371-3). While Mildred sees the sensual aspect of their relationship as “the curse of the beginning” (1. 3. l. 76), Mertoun argues that the true sin would be to deny the purity of their love: “if sorrow— / Sin—if the end came—must I now renounce / My reason, blind myself to light, say truth / Is false and lie to God and my own soul? / Contempt were all of this!” (1. 3. ll. 205-9). He believes that to turn away from their love would be to turn away from spiritual truth; therefore,
Mertoun avows that even though their physical love has transgressed social boundaries, he has been sublimated through his love for Mildred: “Mildred, break it if you choose, / A heart the love of you uplifted—still / Uplifts, thro' this protracted agony / To heaven!” (1. 3. ll. 164-67).

In his study of Macready's changes to the play, Joseph W. Reed, Jr notes that Macready's advice to omit the full implications of Mildred and Mertoun's sexuality, and the religious imagery that implies it, “make[s] the whole affair seem pretty harmless, giving the audience the impression that the 'blot' was nothing more than a stolen kiss” (601). It is significant that Browning did not accept these suggested changes because it confirms that the issue of sin is central to his symbolic design in the play. Indeed the sexual dimension of their relationship is key because it expresses Browning's romantic irony: Mildred believes that she has lost her connection with the divine when in fact love in the real world, expressed by the sensual, is actually the manifestation of the ideal. Although the same level of emphasis on sexual passion is not placed in The Return of the Druses as it is in A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, the ironic implications of Mildred's convictions are the same as Djabal's failure to see that Anael's love for him is grounded in his humanity and not in his professed divinity, as well as Anael's inability to see that Djabal's divinity has been inherent in his human attributes all along.

Browning emphasizes in A Blot in the 'Scutcheon the contrast between a concept of marriage that views it merely from a temporal perspective as a social and economic arrangement, and a symbolic concept of marriage that expresses the union of the ideal and the real. That Lord Tresham only views Mildred and Mertoun's marriage as a social contract is clear from his obsessive interest in Mertoun's family name and aristocratic pedigree:
“Your name
– Noble among the noblest in itself,
Yet taking in your person, fame avers,
New price and lustre, — (as that gem you wear,
Transmitted from a hundred knightly breasts,
Fresh chased and set and fixed by its last lord,
Seems to rekindle at the core) — your name
Would win you welcome! — ” (1. 2. ll. 1-9)

Guendolen testifies to Lord Tresham's pride when she speaks with Mildred about Mertoun, “He's proud, confess; so proud with brooding o'er / The light of his interminable line” (1. 3. ll. 44-5). When Guendolen teases Mildred, telling her that Lord Tresham has discovered a flaw in the Earl's line, she makes a joke at Tresham's expense: “Perdition! all's discovered! Thorold finds / — That the Earl's greatest of all grandmother's / Was grander daughter still—to that fair dame / Whose garter slipped down at the famous dance!” (1. 3. ll. 65-8). Guendolen continues to poke fun at her brother-in-law's family pride when Lord Tresham hints at Mertoun's fallibility after he has discovered their affair: “Has what I'm fain to hope, / Arrived then? Does that huge tome show some blot / In the Earl's 'scutcheon come no longer back / Than Arthur's time?” (2. ll. 111-14). Mertoun's impassioned request to Lord Tresham that he consider his suit not because of his social status but rather because of his love of Mildred, establishes the crucial contrast between Browning's two protagonists and it also serves to reveal Mertoun's spiritual import in the play.

The contrast between two different concepts of marriage, which is so important to the philosophical meaning of the play, is further elucidated by the relationship between A Bot in the 'Scutcheon and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.
When Lord Tresham exclaims that he is honored that Mertoun wants his sister Mildred's hand in marriage, which will unite “both / Our Houses even closer than respect / Unites them now,” it is clear that Browning is invoking Shakespeare's play. This is also apparent from the fact that Browning makes a point to tell the audience that Mildred is fourteen, the same age as Juliet, and from the similar plot line that sees Mertoun clamber up Mildred's balcony into her chamber. Crucially, Browning uses *Romeo and Juliet* as a conscious foundation for *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* in the same way that he uses *Othello* for *Luria* by drawing similarities between their respective mimetic plots only as they relate to the symbolic plot of his plays.

DeVane's focus on the empirical similarities between *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* and *Romeo and Juliet* reveals the inevitable problems that arise from looking for a sequence of cause and effect in Browning's romantic dramas. DeVane argues that in not including a dispute between the two great houses of Tresham and Mertoun, Browning takes away the motive for Mildred and Mertoun's secrecy: while “Romeo and Juliet suffer their tragedy because their joyous and passionate love is thwarted by a fate which works through the bloody feud of their families. Mertoun and Mildred undergo their tragedy because of embarrassment, lack of control, and gnawing consciousnesses.” Thus DeVane maintains that Browning's tragedy is not as well grounded in reason as Shakespeare's, and is therefore not as convincing” (142).

However, Bonaparte's discussion about the importance of St. Francis for the symbolic presentation of love in the nineteenth century gives insight into the significance of *Romeo and Juliet* for Browning's play. In analyzing the Christian concept of love as it is expressed in the First Epistle of John, Bonaparte explains how, “It was from this passage...that St. Francis had chosen the idea of "love" as the idiom in which religion was to speak in his own time, becoming almost from that moment the very image of
agape through the centuries that followed, surely the reason Shakespeare takes the trouble to tell us that Friar Lawrence, who marries Romeo and Juliet despite the enmity of their parents, is of the order of St. Francis. In the very heart of hatred, he is one who sanctions love” (Poetics of Poesis). With this in mind, I would argue that Browning invokes Shakespeare because he wants the audience to know that Mildred and Mertoun's immediate and instinctive love for each other, like that of Romeo and Juliet, is itself the manifestation of God's love.

That love is the central symbolic focus in the play is clear from the philosophical discussions that arise from Tresham's discovery of Mildred's affair. When Gerard, the loyal retainer, informs Lord Tresham that Mildred has been receiving nocturnal visits from a cloaked man, he engages Mildred in a conversation about the nature of love. Before confronting Mildred about her lover, he asks her “what love should you esteem—best love?” However, when she answers “true love,” he asks her to consider precisely “whose love is best / Of all that love or that profess to love?” (2. ll. 151-5). Mildred tries to address the different types of love, but Lord Tresham interrupts her to express his belief that a brother's love exceeds them all:

Mildred, I do believe a brother's love
For a sole sister must exceed them all.
For see now, only see! there's no alloy
Of earth that creeps into the perfect'st gold
Of other loves—no gratitude to claim;
You never gave her life, not even aught
That keeps life—never tended her, instructed,
Enriched her—so, your love can claim no right
O'er her save pure love's claim: that's what I call
Freedom from earthliness. (2. ll. 157-66)

Lord Tresham uses the metaphor of pure gold and base metal to argue that unlike other types of love, his unconditional brotherly love is not infused with alloy, or earthly concerns, which would serve to diminish the purity of the gold. Lord Tresham sees his love as transcendent and pure and entirely un tarnished by the concerns of the material world. This leads him to the conclusion that “a brother's love exceeds / All the world's love in its unworldliness” (2. ll. 200-1).

Similarly, Lord Tresham sees Mildred's purity as something divine and eternal, and thus when he discovers her physicality, he cannot see how she can be both pure and corporeal at the same time: “And must I rend this web, tear up, break down / The sweet and palpitating mystery / That makes her sacred?” (2. ll. 211-13). Lord Tresham's conviction that Mildred cannot be both transcendent and worldly leads to an epistemological crisis that bears upon Browning's symbolic exploration of embodiment and the irony of love in the play:

Oh, thought's absurd! — as with some monstrous fact
Which, when ill thoughts beset us, seems to give
Merciful God that made the sun and stars,
The waters and the green delights of earth,
The lie! I apprehend the monstrous fact—
Yet know the maker of all worlds is good,
And yield my reason up, inadequate
To reconcile what yet I do behold—
Blasting my sense! ” (2. ll. 80-88)

In this simile, Lord Tresham exclaims that to believe that Mildred is guilty is the same as believing God to be false, and he declares that since he believes in God, he must
maintain the separation between the ideal and the real: “Heaven / Keep me within its hand! — / I will sit here / Until thought settle and I see my course. / Avert, oh God, only this woe from me!” (2. ll. 99-103). Browning emphasizes the epistemological implications of Lord Tresham's speech when his protagonist concedes that his reason cannot solve the contradiction that he perceives through his senses. Browning’s choice of language here calls attention to the symbolic plot: utilizing diction that denotes the mind as it interacts with the material—“reason,” “thought,” “fact,” and “sense,”—he reveals that Lord Tresham cannot reconcile the ideal and the real because he apprehends the “monstrous fact” of Mildred's sexuality—her embodiment—through his reason, or the faculty of conceptual thought.

Browning shows how, caught in cause-and-effect reasoning, Lord Tresham can only come to the inescapable conclusion of Mildred's sinfulness:

There — reasoning is thrown away on it!
Prove she's unchaste...why, you may after prove
That she's a poisoner, traitress, what you will!
Where I can comprehend naught, naught's to say.
Or do, I think. Force on me but the first
Abomination, — then outpour all plagues,
And I shall ne'er make count of them.” (2. ll. 141-7)

Moreover, in starting from the false foundation which views the physical as inimical to the sacred, Lord Tresham's discovery of Mildred's “sin” soon leads to his existential despair. Lord Tresham makes it clear that he fears that the erosion of his faith in Mildred's purity will lead to moral chaos. 

Browning contrasts Lord Tresham's recourse to his reason with Guendolen, who uses her instinct—the same term that Browning uses to denote Luria’s spiritual
sight — to perceive Mildred's truth. After Lord Tresham has unveiled Mildred's indiscretions to Guendolen and Austin, Guendolen rejects her husband's request that they abandon Mildred because she wants to stay and find out for herself whether Mildred has really sinned. Guendolen’s request that Austin “Wait for me. Pace the gallery and think / On the world's seemings and realities, / Until I call you” (2. ll. 397-8), is an important symbolic moment that can easily be missed, if *A Blot in the Scutcheon* was intended to be read as a realistic play, this statement could be taken as a typical example of what is often seen as Browning's needless obscurity; however, read symbolically, it is clear that in referring to “seemings” and “realities,” the two aspects of the world, Guendolen is asking Austin, and in turn Browning is asking the audience, to consider the relationship between truth and embodiment.

When Guendolen asks Mildred whom it is that she loves, it is significant that she is able to perceive that Mildred's lover and Mertoun are the same person without needing to be told. Thus she calls back Austin to say “spare your pains— / When I have got a truth, that truth I keep.” Guendolen explains to Mildred that she “divined, / Felt by an instinct how it was” and exclaims “why else/ Should I pronounce you free from all that heap / Of sins which had been irredeemable” (2. ll. 425-29). Since Guendolen has looked upon the “monstrous fact” with her intuitive faculties, she is able to see how the real and the ideal can coexist. This very plot point confused contemporary reviewers who could not understand why Mildred would not tell Lord Tresham after he confronts her that her lover and Mertoun are both one and the same. A reviewer for *The Literary Gazette* argued that “Mildred has no reason on earth, when detected in and confessing her folly, for not telling her brother the whole truth, saving him from paroxysms of passion, herself from the bitterest denunciations, and, in short—the tragedy from its catastrophe” (6, 401-2). This is the same criticism that
most reviews leveled against *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*; however, I would argue that Mildred's silence is only problematic if we look for a plot that is driven by the laws of cause and effect rather than as the embodiment of ideas in the play. Indeed, Mildred's failure to tell her brother that her lover and Mertoun are the same person is central to Browning's discussion of epistemology and to the tragic irony that is derived from the fact that Lord Tresham fails to see how Mildred can be both worldly and transcendent at the same time.

Lord Tresham's focus on the stainless purity of his love for Mildred and his obsession with her unsullied innocence is symptomatic of his preoccupation with the ideal at the expense of the real, and it is this inability to see how the material can partake of the divine that also explains the symbolic significance of the “blot” that entitles Browning's play. In Act three when Lord Tresham lies in wait to catch Mildred's lover outside of her window, he reflects on the hope that he had always held that no taint should ever come to his aristocratic line:

> But I … to hope that from a line like ours
> No horrid prodigy like this would spring,
> Were just as though I hoped that from these old
> Confederates against the sovereign day,
> Children of older and yet older sires,
> Whose living coral berries dropped, as now
> On me, on many a baron's surcoat once,
> On many a beauty's wimple—would proceed
> No poison tree, to thrust, from hell its root,
> Hither and thither its strange snaky arms” (3. 1. ll. 17-26)

Throughout the play, Browning refers to Adam and Eve's fall from paradise, and the
serpent who is responsible for them losing their immortality to become merely temporal beings, to show Mildred's belief that her relationship with Mertoun has brought about her separation from the ideal. Similarly, Lord Tresham continues these Biblical allusions to display his concern that no such poisonous, serpentine root will become entwined with the unadulterated purity of his family name. Thus the “blot” of Mildred's sexuality that has ostensibly marred his escutcheon mirrors the earlier metaphor of the alloy to reveal once more Lord Tresham's conviction that what is embodied cannot also be pure.

It is Browning's characters' failure to apprehend what he believes to be the true nature of embodiment that comprises the philosophical tragedy of his romantic drama and that leads Sir Tresham to confront Mertoun in the denouement of the play. In the final act, the fact that Lord Tresham fights Mertoun even though he has learned of his real identity is another plot point, alongside Mildred's reticence, that has riled critics of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*. In his suggested emendations to the play, Macready wanted to change this part as well so that Lord Tresham recognized Mertoun only after he has stabbed him; however, Browning did not incorporate this modification in the published version of the play because the violent outburst that proceeds from Lord Tresham's discovery that Mildred's lover and Mertoun are the same person is key to Browning's symbolic plot, the importance of which is revealed in the speech that Sir Tesham's makes to Mertoun before striking him with his sword:

Not one least word on your life!
Be sure that I will strangle in your throat
The least word that informs me how you live
And yet what you are! No doubt 'twas you
Taught Mildred still to keep that face and sin!
We should join hands in frantic sympathy
If you once taught me the unteachable,
Explained how you can live so, and so lie!
With God's help I will keep despite my sense
The old belief—a life like yours is still
Impossible! Now draw! (3. 1. ll. 72-83)

The symbolic significance of Lord Tresham's speech is easier to explicate when we see that it is the summation of the epistemological crisis that he experiences after he first learns of Mildred's deceit. In Act Two when Sir Tresham struggles to reconcile what Gerard has told him of Mildred's relationship with Mertoun and his faith in her purity, he exclaims, “That Mildred...oh no, no! Both tales are true, / Her pure cheek's story and the forester's!” (2. ll. 96-7) In accusing Mertoun of being the one who “taught Mildred still to keep that face and sin,” Lord Tresham is referring to the dichotomy that he first perceived between Mildred's spirituality and her sensuality, which is the also the same tension that leads him to ask Mertoun to explain how “you live / And yet what you are!” Indeed, the crux of Sir Tresham's speech is that he wishes Mertoun to explain the inexplicable to him—how Mildred can be both pure and earthly, and on the level of ideas, how the ideal can also be real. Even though Sir Tresham concedes that he perceives an assault on his principles, he declares that he will retain “the old belief,” his conviction that the idea and the real are separate; yet despite his desperate need to confirm the foundation of his existential being, Lord Tresham's epistemological worldview is inevitably violently uprooted, which is what leads him to strike out at Mertoun at this pivotal moment in the play.

When Lord Tresham confesses to Mildred that Mertoun is dead, she assumes that her brother's code of honor would have let Mertoun explain the genesis of their
clandestine affair, and she condemns him for still killing Mertoun even after he knew
the truth; however, Lord Tresham assures her that it was only as he looked upon
Mertoun's body bathed in the moonlight that he had a sudden illumination about the
ttrue nature of their love:

I gathered all
The story ere he told it: I saw through
The troubled surface of his crime and yours
A depth of purity immovable,
Had I but glanced, where all seemed turbidest
Had gleamed some inlet to the calm beneath;
I would not glance: my punishments at hand.” (3. 2. ll. 98-103)

The epistemological implication of Browning's river metaphor in this dialogue can be
better understood if we look at his similar use of it in *La Saisiaz*. In this later, more
personal poem, the stream denotes the will or the divine force that is the prime agent
of all of the causes and effects in the embodied world, which manifests in the ripples
and eddies on the surface of the water. Browning follows this metaphor by stating his
conviction that only the fancy can perceive the divine cause that propels the water:
“what before caused all the causes, what effect of all effects.” (*La Saisiaz* l. 225).

Similarly, in Sir Tresham's speech “the troubled surface” of the water “where
all seemed turbidest” is the crime or sin of Mildred and Mertoun's love as it is
perceived in the manifested world of cause and effect. Lord Tresham wishes that he
had “gleamed” how their illicit love was grounded in the ideal: “A depth of purity
immovable” —the original first cause that comprises the calm beneath the rippling
surface of phenomena. Browning's choice of the verb “gleam” here is also significant
because it points to a realization that is brought about suddenly and clearly like a flash
of light. This is the intuition of the fancy through which Guendolen is able to perceive Milded's truth. The fact that Sir Tresham tells Mildred that his mode of perception changed as he saw “the moon on his [Mertoun's] flushed cheek” (l. 97) is an important example of Browning's Romantic symbolism, as it was for the German Romantics, as seen in Novalis' *Hymns to the Night*, which was reviewed by Carlyle in the *Foreign Review* in 1829. In Novalis' poem sequence the night, signified by the moon, is the time when we no longer perceive through our senses and thus we are able to perceive the noumenal realm. Indeed through this metaphor Browning shows that rather than looking at Mildred's “sin” through his reason, which only interacts with the forms of conceptual knowledge that process sensory data, Lord Tresham has finally looked through the real with the fancy to see its inception in the ideal.

Mildred's sudden death upon hearing Lord Tresham's confession can seem confusing on the level of the mimetic plot in much the same way that Anael's spontaneous demise perplexed readers of *The Return of the Druses*, but her death, viewed on the level of the symbolic plot, allows Mildred to set her soul free as she has finally realized that it is through her love of Mertoun that she reaches the ideal. It is only after Mildred's illumination that the audience learns that Lord Tresham is also dying after having taking poison to end his life. The fact that Browning fails to mention such a crucial act up until this point makes Lord Tresham's sudden revelation seem more farcical than tragic, which was perhaps an oversight on Browning's part having cut five acts to three on Macready's recommendation in order to speed up the action of the play. Although Browning does not make it clear at what point Lord Tresham drank the poison, his expostulations upon taking the poison appear to refer back to his initial discovery of Mildred's transgressions:

I said, just as I drank the poison off,
The earth would no longer be earth to me,
The life out of all life was gone from me.
There are blind ways provided, the foredone
Heart-weary player in this pageant-world
Drops out by, letting the main masque defile
By the conspicuous portal: I am through—” (3. 2. ll. 134-40)

Lord Tresham's dying words are clearly derivative of Macbeth's speech in Act 5
Scene 5 where Shakespeare shows that Macbeth has lost all existential meaning in the
world, having destroyed his soul. In referring the audience to this point in *Macbeth*
Browning wants to emphasize Lord Tresham's epistemological crisis, which is why he
was particularly insulted when Macready suggested that he changed the ending so that
Lord Tresham does not die but rather sequesters himself in a monastery—a finale
that Browning felt would take away the dignity of tragedy. It is important to note that
after Lord Tresham reflects upon his reasons for taking his own life, it is no longer his
existential pain that he dwells on but rather the nature of his imaginative epiphany and
thus, like Mildred, he dies having perceived truth.

*A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is Browning's most well known play but it is also his
weakest. The pressure from Macready to write a play that would appeal to a mass
audience, as well as Browning's own desire to succeed on the stage, led him to form
his symbols from elements of the popular courtship plot, including a secret affair and
a final duel that lead to melodramatic deaths of both protagonists. The ideas that these
symbols embody, however, are not as clearly conveyed as they are in *A Return of the
Druses* or in his closet dramas, as Browning condenses his philosophical exposition in
order to speed up the action of the play. Furthermore, as Browning's ultimate goal of
the play is not verisimilitude but romantic irony, its extremely subtle philosophic
foundation often makes the temporal plot seem illogical and overall poorly constructed. Indeed, contemporary reviews of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* comment on the tension between the simplicity and accessibility of its plot with the complexity and obscurity of its execution: the critic of *The Athaenaum* exclaimed that “The plot is plain enough, but the acts and feelings of the characters are inscrutable and abhorrent, and the language is as strange as their proceedings” (6, 400). Similarly, *The Spectator* complained that “The motives, situation, and purpose of the characters, are alike unaccountable” (6, 402) and *The Times* lamented how “His [Browning's] whole thoughts seem to have been directed to the production of striking effects, and these, in some instances, he has certainly obtained, but it has been at the expense of nature and probability” (6, 398-400).

However, the play was not universally criticized: while *The Pathfinder* conceded that “The language is harsh and perplexed” and that “It is difficult to read A Blot in the 'Scutcheon without studying it,” they assert that they would prefer to work at grasping Browning's obscure but original thought than to watch the formulaic reproductions that prevailed on the Victorian stage: “we would rather search this stony, rugged soil for a few wild delicate flowers of the mountain than pluck hotbeds of gaudy tulips which may be raised in any garden” (7, 396-7). Moreover John Forster, who was part of Browning's literary circle and a keen proponent of restoring the poetic drama, defends the play in *The Examiner* against those critics who questioned the logic of Mildred's silence and of Lord Tresham's violence, arguing that they had clearly missed the point of Browning's tragedy. Reading it as symbolic, romantic drama, Forster declared “There is a deeper moral for those who can see deeper truths than the conventional ones” (6, 400-1).

It is clear from contemporary reviews of *The Return of the Druses* and *A Blot*
in the Scutcheon that the most misunderstood aspect of these plays is Browning's use of romantic irony and how it informs his philosophic sense of tragedy. The tension that arose between Browning and Macready over their different dramatic aims finally led to the dissolution of their working relationship, and Browning turned from Covent Garden to write his next play, *Colombe's Birthday*, for Charles Kean. In this last play that Browning would write for the stage, he moves away from romantic irony for a more direct philosophical exposition on romantic love, which was perhaps in response to the negative reviews of his previous two plays. Nevertheless, Browning still wrote *Colombe's Birthday* as a romantic drama in that the mimetic plot is an embodiment of the symbolic plot of ideas. On the realistic level of the play, Prince Berthold's claim to power threatens Colombe's right to rule over Juliers. When Berthold offers to marry the duchess, she has to make a choice between a loveless marriage with the prince and a loving union with Valence, who is not of noble birth. This simplistic choice between power and love is also symbolic of Colombe's choice between the real and the ideal, which has important implications for Browning's discussion of epistemology and the concept of romantic love in the play. As Forster remarks in *The Examiner*, “the germ of the story is a very simple in contrast to its subtlety of treatment, as with the greater part of Mr Browning's writings” (9, 381-2).

When Prince Berthold learns that he has a possible right to the duchy of Juliers, he sees it as part of his grand quest to become Emperor: it is the “one link, however insignificant, / Of the great chain by which I reach my hope— / A link I must secure” (3. 1. 18). Melchior, the prince's confidante, argues that the prince's conquest of Juliers will only be insignificant if he acquires it through an easy assertion of his right to the duchy rather than through the wily machinations that prove and develop the assiduity of his intellect. Comparing Berthold to his uncle, the
Pope, and to his cousin, the king, Melchior exclaims: “You are a mind, — / They, body: too much of mere legs-and-arms / Obstructs the mind so! Match these with their like: / Match mind with mind” (ll. 55-7). The implications of what Browning means here by “mind” can be more fully explicated by comparing it to his discussion of embodiment in “Charles Avison.” In this later poem, Browning exclaims that soul, as the expression of noumenal truth, seeks to embody itself in the forms of the material world that are apprehended by the mind: “Yet wherefore heaving sway and restless roll / This side and that, except to emulate / Stability above? To match and mate / Feeling with knowledge,—make as manifest / Soul's work as Mind's work” (ll. 183-187). Thus by referring to mind in Colombe's Birthday, Browning means the intellectual assertion of individual will in the phenomenal realm: Melchior wants the prince to approach the conquest of Cleves not as a blind assertion of power, or “body,” like the Pope and King, but by means of tactics that will test and evolve the progress and prowess of this faculty.

That Melchior perceives Berthold's conquest—the progress of his mind—as belonging to the real realm and not the ideal realm is clear from his declaration that he is unable to understand neo-Platonic philosophy. Melchior jokes with the prince that his own Juliers, in other words his own conquest, will be to understand the writings of Amelius “this tough Platonist / Your holy uncle disinterred, Amelius—” and the Pope's own exegesis of Amelius' work (3. ll. 70-1). Melchior's offhanded comment is a seemingly unimportant detail that can easily be overlooked, but it offers the key to Browning's symbolic plot. When Berthold replies that the pope “o'er-refines—the scholar's fault!” (l. 76), Browning reveals that, like Melchior, the prince also finds little worth in metaphysical thought. Thus, it is significant that when Berthold wants to examine the purpose of his life he echoes Aristotle, whose concrete nature led him
to focus on sensory observation as the basis of philosophical thought, rather than Plato, whose more abstract mind led him to ponder the ideal forms that transcend material reality:

How do I let my life slip? Say, this life,
I lead now, differs from the common life
Of other men in mere degree, not kind,
Of joys and griefs, — still there is such degree
Mere largeness in a life is something, sure, —
Enough to care about and struggle for,
In this world: for this world, the size of things;
The sort of things, for that to come, no doubt
A great is better than a little aim. (Il. 76-85)

Utilizing Aristotelian terms, Berthold concedes that his life is only different from the life of other men in degree and not in kind. The philosophical import of the passage is derived from the fact that by “kind” Berthold refers to things in their essence and that by “degree” he refers to things in their particularity. Crucially, Berthold sees the world as differing only in degree and not in kind, which shows that he does not see things as they are in themselves but simply as they are more or less difficult for him to acquire. For Berthold the particular, “the size of things,” belongs to the temporal world whereas the essential, “the sort of things,” belongs to heaven, and thus Browning makes it clear that the prince sees no relationship between the particular and the universal in the material realm. In striving to become Emperor, Berthold says that it will be no different to fail at a larger aim than it is to fail at a smaller one because the distinct feelings that they invoke will only ever be one of degree.

When Colombe asks Valence about his impressions of the prince, he responds
with a long, abstract speech wherein he further explicates Berthold's epistemological worldview:

He gathers earth's whole good into his arms
Standing, as man now, stately, strong and wise,
Marching to fortune, not surprised by her.
One great aim, like a guiding-star, above—
Which tasks strength, wisdom, stateliness, to lift
His manhood to the height that takes the prize;
A prize not near—lest overlooking earth
He rashly spring to seize it—nor remote,
So that he rest upon his path content:
But day by day, while shimmering grows shine,
And the faint circlet prophesies the orb,
He sees so much as, just evolving these,
The stateliness, the wisdom and the strength,
To due completion, will suffice this life,
And lead him at his grandest to the grave.” (4. ll. 208-222)

Browning configures Berthold's goal to be Emperor—his aim to master the actual—as a guiding star, which for Browning, as we have seen in *Sordello*, *Strafford* and *Luria*, is a symbol that expresses the relationship between man and the ideal. However it is only the shimmer of the “faint circlet,” or the halo of light surrounding the star, that Berthold sees and not the celestial substance that is the true source of the light. Valence makes it clear that Berthold follows the star's light only insofar as it enables him to evolve temporal life to its fulness: as it “will suffice this life / And lead him at his grandest to the grave.” Thus Berthold is essentially circumscribed in that
his scope is entirely human and finite; therefore, Valence suggests to Colombe that what is Berthold's greatest strength as a man is also his greatest weakness in terms of spirit.

Nevertheless Valence marvels at how the whole scope of the world seems to magically serve the prince for his own advancement so that while he exerts his will on the half below him, he continues on his upward journey to conquer that which is left:

This for his own good: —with the world, each gift
Of God and man, —reality, tradition,
Fancy and fact—so well environ him,
That as a mystic panoply they serve—
Of force untenanted, to awe mankind,
And work his purpose out with half the world,
While he, their master, dextrously slipt
From such encumbrance, is meantime employed
With his own prowess on the other half” (4. ll. 228-36)

It is significant for the symbolic meaning of Colombe's choice between Valence and Berthold that when Valence speaks of the scope of the world he begins, like Browning, from the assumption that the objective material world of phenomena as they exist in space and time is the manifestation of the noumenal realm of soul. Valence emphasizes this assumption by setting off in parentheses the symbolic language that Browning uses throughout his poetry to denote these two aspects of the world that are dependent on and inseparable from the other: “ —with the world, each gift / Of God and man, —reality, tradition, / Fancy and fact—.” However, although the entirety of the world appears to serve Berthold in his quest, Valence emphasizes how the force that propels him is “untenanted,” by which he means that this force is
not aware of, or beholden to, a higher power. Thus in Valence's depiction of the prince, Browning juxtaposes vocabulary of the ideal and the real in striking pairs: “mystic panopoly,” “airy might,” “the spirit of all flesh,” “man of men” and “the fiery centre of an earthly world,” employing these pairs not to suggest poetic embodiment, as he does in the symbolic title of *Bells and Pomegranates*, but rather to show that here the ideal is circumscribed by the body, or by Berthold's merely temporal reach. Despite the fact that Berthold's power will gradually transform him into a type that makes meaning for the temporal world, he does not see that the real is part of and is informed by the noumenal realm of soul. Therefore, Browning shows that ultimately the prince will thus never be able to create a deeper truth.

At this point in the play, Colombe has not fully perceived the meaning of Valence's assessment of her powerful suitor, and she laments what she sees as her own impotence as a ruler: “Some such a fortune I had dreamed should rise / Out of my own—that is, above my power / Seemed other, greater potencies to stretch—” (4. ll. 252-4). She confesses to Valence that she had thought that it would be through the love of such a powerful man that she could realize her own potentiality, “It was not I moved there, I think: But one I could, —though constantly beside, / And aye approaching, —still keep distant from, / And so adore, 'T was a man moved there” (ll. 255-8). Valence tells Colombe that because of Berthold's mastery of actuality, his offer of marriage would indeed enable her to realize her potentiality in this world; however, he maintains that it is precisely this finite scope that precludes the prince's ability to love her, since for Valence, as it is for Browning, love is the means through which the ideal can be intuited by mankind.

When Colombe asks Valence how it is that the prince could help her realize her potential but not love her as well, Browning brings together the discussion of
epistemology and its implications for romantic love in the play. Instead of utilizing the reason, which apprehends the facts of the material world, Valence defers to his “lover's instinct,” the same term that Browning uses to denote Luria’s and Guendolen’s spiritual sight, which allows him to gleam the deeper truth of the situation: “Because where reason, even, finds no flaw, / Unerringly a lover's instinct may” (4. ll. 292-3). Indeed for Browning, intuition, or the faculty of fancy, is synonymous with the ability to love as it denotes a perception of the connection between the real and the ideal. That Valence embodies fancy is clear from the fact that he is sublimated through his love for Colombe: “well, Heaven's gifts are not wasted, and that gaze / Kept, and shall keep me to her end, her own! / She was above it—but so would not sink / My gaze to earth!” (II. ll. 88-91)

Browning makes it clear in the play that in contrast to Valence, Berthold embodies reason and the mind. This is why when Melchior encourages Berthold to feign love for Colombe to achieve his goal, he says, “I cannot shut my soul to fact. / Of course I might by forethought and contrivance / Reason myself into a rapture” (5. ll. 51-3). Browning's use of alliteration here emphasizes what he perceives to be an oxymoron in Berthold's speech: the idea that man can reach rapture, or transcendent illumination, through reason. Indeed, it is precisely Berthold's recourse to reason and his cultivation of mind that leads him to admit that while he admires Colombe's lineage, virtue and intelligence, “A further love I do not understand” (l. 106). This is epistemological for Browning as Berthold cannot attain a love that transcends the material world. The Prince makes it clear to Colombe that their marriage will not be a symbolic union of the real and the ideal because he is only proposing to her in order to consolidate his political position. Avowing his incapacity to love, Berthold exclaims that he will not “promise what my soul can ne'er acquit” (l. 126) and in
asking Colombe to join him as “the Earth's first woman,” (l. 132), Browning
emphasizes the mundane limits of his temporal scope. Indeed, once Valence thinks
that Colombe has accepted Berthold, he sees it as a “farewell to Heaven / Welcome to
earth—this taking death for life— / This spurning love and kneeling to the world” (5.
ll. 280-2). Valence's juxtaposition of heaven, life and love with earth, death and world highlights what would be the temporality of their union at the expense of the ideal.

Berthold's inability to truly love Colombe speaks to the fact that in using his mind he can only see the world in its phenomenal form; on the other hand, Valence's instinctive love for her shows that in using his fancy he sees things as they really are: the “sort of things” rather than the “size of things.” It is this essential contrast between Berthold and Valence that also explains the seemingly underdeveloped role of politics in the play. DeVane notes that Browning's characters in Colombe's Birthday are derived from the realm of politics but that no political issues are actually raised or resolved in the play (148). This is true when we read the play from the perspective of realistic drama; however, political issues are indeed raised in the play but only as they pertain to the symbolic plot. As we have seen in Browning's political and historical dramas, the change from autocracy to democracy, in its different iterations, symbolizes the progressive manifestation of soul, and it is the poet-figure who can perceive when the forms of the empirical world no longer embody truth for the age. The fact that in Valence's depiction of Berthold he uses the terms “reality” and “tradition” in conjunction with “fancy and fact” to denote the scope of the world — which is the very same language that Browning uses to describe the poet-seer in his Essay on Shelley and in Luria— indicates that the political positions of Berthold and Valence in the play denote their respective relationships to the real and the ideal.

As in Strafford and King Victor and King Charles, the transition from
autocracy to democracy in *Colombe's Birthday* signifies the transition to a new paradigm. Berthold uses the metaphor of the end of a grand dance to express his recognition that the aristocratic right of kings is fading with the night as the dawn of democracy emerges: “We seem, in Europe, pretty well at end / O' the night, with our great masque” (V. ll. 28-9). When the prince is considering whether to assert his lineage and inherited political power—his 'kingly craft'—in his attempt to secure Juliers, or whether to court Colombe's heart, he continues the metaphor of the ball, arguing that it would be better for him to stay in his finery until morning signals the end of the dance, rather than try to steal out and re-enter in a new costume (ll. 30-45). Thus, clinging to a fading paradigm, Berthold exclaims that if he proposes to Colombe, he will not pretend that it is an expression of love because he is only seeking a union that will further his hereditary claim to her realm. The significance of this for the symbolic plot is that Berthold clings to tradition, the shadow of reality—the phenomenal rather than the noumenal, which is its internal spiritual meaning.

In contrast to Berthold, Valence's transcendent love for Colombe reveals that he can see into the true reality that is the foundation of the material world. As such, he represents the dawn of democracy, the new form that will embody the truth of the age. Valence comes to Colombe as the representative of Cleves to address the wrongs of his people and to encourage her to do her duty. He explains to Colombe that although she might not have Berthold's power, his power is based on a false foundation whereas her rule is founded on the people's love: “although the lowest, on true grounds, / Be worth more than the highest rule, on false: / Aspire to rule, on the true grounds!” (3. ll. 335-7) Up until this point, Colombe has only played at being a queen. Sequestered in her palace, she has only held sway over the retinue that respects only her hereditary position, yet with Valence by her side, the duchess sees a way to realize
her potentiality: “I take my stand / Only as under me the earth is firm: / So, prove the first step stable, all will prove!” (ll. 347-8), and when she declares that “This is indeed my birthday—soul and body” (l. 339), it is a revelation that through Valence she has found a means to act upon a perception of soul. Valence has shown Colombe that she must move away from “established form” (l. 292) for “there needs a new consecration,” (l. 296) — an ordainment of a new expression of soul. Even Guibert who, along with his fellow courtiers, has relied on intellect to secure his political position and who previously emulated the prince's temporal rise to power, sees truth in Valence, proclaiming: “whate'er your birth, — / As things stand now, I recognize yourself / (If you'll accept experience of some date) / As like to be the leading man o' the time” (ll. 277-80). Thus, while Gaucelme maintains that Valence is only pursuing his own political agenda, Guibert testifies to the prince and Colombe that Valence's actions are impelled by love.

Although Colombe has perceived spiritual growth through her interactions with Valence, she still considers a union with Berthold as a possible way to manifest her inner potential. When Valence tells Colombe that it is because he loves another (meaning Colombe) that he knows a union with the prince would preclude such love, the central crux of the play is disclosed. In a scene that would typically incur a tragic misunderstanding in Browning's romantic dramas, Colombe is shocked to hear that Valence loves and mistakenly thinks that he loves another; however, instead of a realization brought about through romantic irony, Valence professes his feelings for Colombe and the symbolic plot of the play is revealed in the direct question that he poses for her: “Is love or vanity the best? / You, solve it for the world's sake—you, speak first / What all will shout one day—, you, vindicate / Our earth and be its angel!” (ll. 404-7). Colombe has to choose between romantic love and the Empire, or
symbolically speaking, she has to choose between transcendence and temporal circumscription.

The true nature of this choice is made clear to Colombe after the prince discovers a law that forbids Colombe from marrying below her rank unless she forfeit her right to the duchy, and Berthold tells her that she must choose between Valence's love and his own power. When Colombe finally defers to the prince, he defiantly declares to Melchior that the Empire has won. However, although Berthold's plan to marry Colombe had led Melchior to forego metaphysical thought——symbolized by Amelius—and return to his usual books, he uncharacteristically argues that since Colombe accepted the prince without hearing Valence speak, it is not a sufficient test of form and mind. Melchior implores Berthold to “Let me, but this once, work a problem out, / And evermore be dumb! / The Empire wins? / To better purpose have I read my books!” (ll. 249-51). Thus Melchior's quest to prove the supremacy of Empire (the material) over love (the immaterial) also becomes a test of Valence's conception of love.

Informing Valence that if he were to make a claim upon Colombe, then the prince would withdraw his suit and she might be forced to accept him, thereby losing her land and title, Melchior asks Valence to decide whether he will pursue his own good or that of Colombe's instead. Although Valence loves the duchess, he is also able to recognize the restorative potential that her love would have upon another: “Who knows how far, beside, the light from her / May reach, and dwell with, what she looks upon?” (5. ll. 299-300). Thus he exclaims that “Had I seen such an one, / As I loved her—weighing thoroughly that word— / So should my task be to evolve her love: / If for myself! --if for another—well” (ll. 316-19). However, when Melchior maintains that the prince is not receptive to this kind of love, Valence speaks
hypothetically about himself to explain to Colombe that she would become both form
and mind to the man who could receive her love. In loving the duchess he would not
serve her by addressing her temporal power as Berthold would; rather his life would
be the expression of selfless devotion to her. Although Valence is clearly speaking
about his own deep love for the duchess, when he is given the chance for a final
request before departing he resists his own desire to ask for a remnant of Colombe
that he longs to take with him—flowers she has worn or a touch of her hand—and
instead selflessly asks the prince to redress the wrongs of Cleves. It is in this moment
that Colombe sees in Valence the expression of a deeper, all-encompassing love that
transcends the self, and she declares to the Berthold that she chooses Valence and
“give[s] up Juliers and the world” (l. 354)

Surprised by Colombe's change of mind, Melchior exclaims: “Berthold, my
one hero / Of the world she gives up, one friend worth my books, / Sole man I think it
pays the pains to watch,— / Speak, for I know you through your popes and kings” (ll.
355-58). Since Melchior only knows the prince through his mastery of the temporal,
he is unable to comprehend the metaphysical, and thus he asks the prince to explain
what has just happened. Although Berthold is still unable to comprehend the meaning
of Colombe's choice, he is left with a vague awareness that something is missing in
his outlook on the world: he admits that “a somewhat wearier life seems to remain /
Than I thought possible” (ll. 369-70) and he asks the courtiers to make preparations
for his new rule, “while I prepare to plod on my old way, / And somewhat wearily, I
must confess!” (ll. 394-5).

The importance of Colombe's choice for the symbolic plot of the play, and the
symbols that Browning uses to carry the level of ideas, can be further explicated if we
look at the relationship between power and love that he had already explored in
Sordello and later consolidated in his concept of the three souls in “A Death in a Desert” (1864) an The first soul, which uses the evidence of the senses, is the instrument of human power, and is what Browning defines as “what does.” This first soul “has the use of earth, and ends the man / Downward” (ll. 87-8). The second soul uses both the mind and the senses and is the instrument of human wisdom, and is what Browning defines as “what knows.” However, these souls are both delimited unless they are transformed by human love, which is the third soul and is defined by Browning as “what Is.” This third soul uses both the first and second souls:

Subsisting whether they assist or no,

And constituting man's self, is what Is—

And leans upon the former, makes it play,

As that played off the first: and tending up,

Holds, is upheld by, God, and ends the man

Upward in that dread point of intercourse,

Nor needs a place, for it returns to Him. (ll. 96-102)

It is only in evolving the third soul, human love, that the temporal limits of the senses and the intellect can be transcended to reach the ideal. Clearly in the play, by “form” and “mind,” Browning is speaking of the first and second soul, and we know that Berthold is circumscribed by the material world precisely because he is unable to love. As John says: “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” (1. John. 4.8). In choosing Valence Colombe chooses romantic love, which Browning understands in its philosophic sense to be the vehicle through which the temporal can meet the divine. Thus when Colombe says that she gives up the world, it is not that she has rejected the temporal, but rather that love has revealed the temporal to be the embodiment of the divine. This is why in the last line of the play she declares:
“Come, Valence, to our friends, God's earth...” (my italics; l. 388). Because of this final reconciliation *Colombe's Birthday* can be considered Browning's only comedy, yet for Browning the marriage is not conveyed in typically social terms but rather in symbolic terms—as it is in *The Blot in the Scutcheon*—in that Colombe's finds in romantic love the union of the ideal and the real.

Browning's decision to move away from romantic irony towards a more direct explication of his philosophical subject rendered *Colombe's Birthday* far more successful than any of his other plays. Although Browning decided to publish *Colombe's Birthday* in *Bells and Pomegranates VI* (1844), Charles Kean had been interested in the play, although he wanted more time to study the part than Browning was willing to give, and it was eventually performed for seven nights at The Haymarket theater in 1853 with Helen Faucit in the title role of Colombe. The performance of Browning's play garnered many appreciative reviews, but again they emphasized the perceived unsuitability of symbolic drama for the Victorian stage. Reviews in *The Leader, The Spectator, The Court Journal, The Manchester Examiner and Times, John Bull,* and *The Examiner* admired the beauty and thought of the play, but felt that it was completely unsuited for theatrical representation. Indeed, the comments in *The Athenaeum* sum up the essence of all of the critical reviews in its assertion that *Colombe's Birthday* is a “charming poem, rather than drama. Its movements for the most part, occur in the chambers of the mind” and thus would fail to attract those who seek “ordinary dramatic motion and action” (9, 382-4). However, *The Era* and *The Atlas* both felt that despite its lack of melodramatic ingredients, Browning's play could indeed succeed on the stage if the audience was more receptive to intellectual drama. Indeed, *The Literary Gazette* remarked that “the production at the Haymarket, on Monday, of Mr. Browning's fine drama of *Colombe's Birthday,*
was an interesting experiment upon the state of the public taste, and speaks well for the determination of Mr Buckstone to illustrate the higher drama, so far as the means within his reach will permit” (19, 388-9). Although Elizabeth Barrett admitted to Mary Russell Mitford that the play had indeed enjoyed a marginal success on the stage, she maintained that “there could be no 'run' for a play of that kind” (19, 98-102) — in other words for the symbolic, romantic drama. The difficulty of presenting symbolic drama for the theater inevitably led Browning to write his last two plays for reading, but during the ten years that he attempted to write for the stage, he had also been developing another symbolic form, the dramatic monologue, the genesis of which I turn to in the following chapter.
Chapter Five
Symbolic Embodiment, the Dramatic Monologue
And the Romantic Drama of *Men and Women*

After Browning turned from writing plays and began the composition of *Men and Women*, he wrote to Joseph Milsand in February of 1853 that “I am writing, a sort of first step towards popularity (for me!) ‘Lyrics,’ with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see” (18, 337-40). While this statement might appear contradictory to Browning’s self-proclaimed objective poetics, I would argue that he does not intend lyric here to mean the form of lyrical poetry, indicated by his placement of lyric in quotation marks and also by the fact that he would go on to remove the more lyrical pieces from the 1863 revised collection of *Men and Women*; rather, Browning is utilizing the same symbolic language that he had already developed in *Sordello* to express his poetics. Indeed, there are several crucial aspects to this statement that reveal the relationship between Browning’s exploration of the romantic symbolism in *Sordello* and the development of his dramatic monologues, which were composed alongside his romantic dramas.

As in *Sordello*, Browning does not intend music and painting to be taken literally but instead to express the ontology of the romantic paradigm, which does not refer to the movement of poets now known as “Romantic” but to the inward turn of the historical development of the Christian consciousness as it contemplates the transcendence of soul. This inward noumenal soul, inward to both man and the world, culminates for Browning in the philosophical idealism of his own age and the poetics of his predecessor Shelley. In his depiction of the progression from classical objectivity to romantic interiority, Browning uses music and song to symbolize the
infinite reach of the inward soul, and in mentioning painting alongside music

Browning reveals the influence of August Wilhelm Schlegel, who refers to painting in comparison to sculpture to denote the deepened transcendent perspective of romantic art in comparison to the classical age, which is a transition that Browning had already symbolized in Jule’s decision to forego sculpture and the classical aesthetic in favor of painting and the recognition of soul in Pippa Passes.

Yet Browning as the next objective iteration of idealism in the historical progression of romantic art will place Dante’s (and by implication Shelley’s) abstract forms conceived through the subjective soul in their objective embodiment. When Sordello heralds Browning as the next step in ideal realism, he foresees that he will depict soul in its material manifestation, which for Browning is represented in dramatic form. Indeed, the image of “light thwarted,” of ideal white light broken into the myriad colors of real life, is how Browning famously defined his poetry to his future wife (10, 21-23). Browning’s own definition of his monologues as “dramatic lyrics” is derived from his symbolic language for the two aspects of the world that are perceived by the double faculty of the objective poet: here lyric refers to the inward-noumenal soul and drama refers to the complexity of personality and identity that is soul in its outward-phenomenal manifestation.

Browning’s desire to “get people to see and hear” also echoes his call in “Transcendentalism” to suffuse poetry with “sights and sounds”—the mythology that will reveal to the consciousness the obfuscated relationship of the ideal to the real. The true transcendentalism recognizes that the objective realm is a symbol that bodies forth the inner meaning of the world, and the objective poet is the Maker-See who recreates the divine in its material existence, revealing the ironic space between the noumenal and its phenomenal embodiment so as to facilitate an increased insight
within the reader whereby he may endeavor to act in the real world upon a perception of soul. Thus Browning places “Transcendentalism” first in the 1863 reorganization of *Men and Women* to serve as a testament to his poetics: his men and women will be the symbols that comprise his new mythology, and in delineating the irony inherent in embodiment he will reveal the relationship of the external to inward life.

That the irony of embodiment is crucial to Browning’s symbolism and his poetics of realism is clear from the fact that he followed “Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books” in the rearrangement of his monologues with “How it Strikes a Contemporary,” which enacts in its form and content the ironic space between soul and act, or the ideal and the real. The central irony of the poem lies in the misinterpretation of the poet from the perspective of the speaker who lacks spiritual insight. He notices that the poet is a man who studies the material world: “He walked and tapped the pavement with his cane, / Scenting the world, looking it full in the face” (ll. 11-12). In taking note of the realm of embodiment and of man in action in the world, “Of all thought, said and acted” (ll. 42-3), the poet observes and appreciates the minutiae of daily life in the town of Valladolid.

The speaker intuits that the poet has some kind of power and insight into their lives, yet he inverts Shelley’s declaration that the poet is the spiritual legislator of mankind because he can only understand the poet’s power in temporal terms; thus, he exclaims that the poet is “chief-inquisitor” (l. 39) and is the actual governor of the town: “The town’s true master if the town but knew” (l. 40). The narrative persona misinterprets the poet’s force as material rather than spiritual, which is indicated by the fact that he describes the poet’s will as pertaining to his physical appearance “The cloak, that somewhat shone and showed the threads / Had purpose, and the ruff significance” (ll. 8-9). The speaker imagines that the poet has influence over concrete
events and assumes that it is by virtue of a privileged relationship with God who he personifies as “our Lord the King.” In visualizing the poet writing letters to an omnipotent King in order to relay all that he has seen, the speaker serves to trivialize this relationship, but more importantly it signifies how the speaker conflates the spiritual and the temporal.

Convinced of the poet’s power over the town, the speaker follows him home and is surprised to find that he does not lead the extravagant and decadent life that he had been rumored to lead, but rather lives contentedly and simply with little material wealth. The speaker imagines the funeral of the poet and perceives the poignant tragedy in the discrepancy between the man’s seeming power and his actual lack of material wealth and societal influence. Pondering the poet’s frugal appearance and congratulating himself upon his good fortune to be dressed in fine attire, the speaker exclaims jovially, “Well I could never write verse” (l. 14), a statement which serves to equate the speaker's materialism with an understanding of verse as merely the skilful metrical arrangement of language rather than as an act of imagination that perceives the ideal that transcends and is embodied in the real world. Indeed, when the speaker calls upon his friends to join him at the Prado and to embrace the brevity of life, it is clear that he slips back into a daily existence that is uninformed by the ideal.

In the form of a dramatic monologue the speaker as an embodied entity is limited in his perception of soul, and in viewing the poet through a temporal lens he is at a remove from the poet who has the perception of spiritual truth. Sympathizing with the narrative persona allows the reader to experience the irony inherent in his incomplete awareness of the ideal and in turn to transcend his limited perspective. I would argue that rather than denoting the relativity of all judgment, as Langbaum argues, this realization is crucial to Browning’s symbolic design in that it facilitates a
perception of his own role in *Men and Women* as the Maker-See and of the concrete and objective nature of his transcendentalism, which is a commitment to discern in the contradictory phenomenal expressions of his *dramatis personae* the relationship between the relative and the absolute. As we saw in *A Soul’s Tragedy*, Browning often puts some of his deepest convictions into the mouths of his casuists: not to qualify his “optimism,” as Armstrong suggests in her essay on Browning’s “Mr Sludge,” but rather to show how truth can be found in even the lowest forms of manifestation. Thus we can see that the monologue is similar in concept to Browning’s plays where he distinguishes the level of spiritual insight in his characters through their response to a problematic circumstance that is epistemological in nature, which reveals the central romantic irony that he defines in *Sordello* between the man of perception who has the spiritual insight into the realm of soul and the man of action who adheres to a merely temporal perspective. Similarly, Browning shows in his plays the differing degree of distance between sight and being in its relation to epistemology through the comparison of characters who, through fancy and feeling, perceive the objective as the embodiment of soul and those who, through the logic of reason and power, perceive the objective as merely an empirical series of cause-and-effect relations. In the plays it is this dialectic between the characters and this tragic space between the ideal and the real that brings about the final recognition of soul.

Similarly to the characters in his plays, Browning’s monologues reveal souls in various degrees of manifestation. David Shaw also views a hierarchy among the monologues, which he observes as a juxtaposition of speakers who have reached an aesthetic, ethical or religious stage of moral and spiritual awareness. Shaw notes that Browning's earliest monologues occupy the aesthetic stage and as such their perspectives are too selfish to address an auditor, or else the address does not bring
about a meaningful interchange. It is significant that the monologues included by Browning in *Bells and Pomegranates* alongside the plays are at this aesthetic stage because it suggests that they are intended to form a contrast to the plays, which reveal the productive space of romantic irony through the dialectic of ideas embodied in the temporal and symbolic plot. Thus at this point, the early monologues can be seen as fragments of Browning’s romantic dramas, and as single manifestations they emphasize the circumscribed existence of the speakers who are individuals unable to grasp anything beyond their senses or who have become imprisoned in the particular, which is why Browning originally grouped “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” under the title of “Madhouse cells.”

Shaw argues that Browning moved beyond the monologues at the aesthetic stage because as a dialectical poet he wanted to expose the limitations of ideas and points of view in order to facilitate moral and spiritual growth in his readers. As such, Browning begins to write monologues that put more emphasis on the dialectic between the speaker and the auditor in order to create a rhetorical irony whereby the cooperating fancy of the reader is encouraged to reject and analyze the ideas presented, which is a view shared by Painter, Erikson and Woolford. I would argue that this development of the monologue is intimately related to Browning’s work as a romantic dramatist. As Browning conceptualized and composed his romantic dramas, the monologue began as an offshoot from his plays to emphasize in form and content the circumscription of the temporal, but as he found that his concept of symbolic drama was incompatible with the stage and as he realized the difficulty of reconciling the mimetic and the symbolic in even his closet dramas, Browning continued to develop the monologue so that they became romantic dramas in and of themselves. Thus within the monologue, the relationship between the speaker and the auditor, or
the embodiment of a dialectic of ideas, and the presentation of differing epistemological responses to them, creates the space for the cooperating fancy of the reader.

Browning develops irony not only within the individual monologues but also by putting them in a dialectical relationship. That Browning intended for his monologues to be considered in relation to each other as well as on an individual basis is clear from the revised arrangement of *Men and Women*, where he removed many of the simpler poems that were rhymed presentations of an emotional or narrative experience and added monologues that connected conceptually with the remaining dramatic personas that were written in blank verse like the plays. This alternative arrangement served to create one dramatic entity in which irony exists not only within but also between the separate monologues. Indeed, the monologues occupy different degrees of ironic distance from each other through the various ways in which the speakers and the paradigms of their respective time periods perceive material forms in both art and religion. Thus I will argue in this chapter that the revised *Men and Women* becomes Browning’s next romantic drama and, as the Maker-See, Browning represents the different iterations of the central irony between perception and being to precipitate the same realization of soul that he had hoped to bring about in the audience/reader of his plays.

The dialectic of ideas that comprises the symbolic plot of *Men and Women* is embodied in each speaking persona who manifest in their temporal existence the spirit and epistemologies of distinct historical epochs from the early classical period to the inception of Christianity and the romantic paradigm, through the late medieval period into the Renaissance and up until Browning’s own nineteenth century. In this chapter, I start by focusing on “Artemis Prologizes” and “Cleon,” individually and in relation
to each other, because they reveal how Browning’s developing formulation of the
dramatic monologue is derived from romantic epistemology: while “Artemis
Prologizes” reveals the fusion of the internal and external that characterizes the
classical age, “Cleon” examines the epistemological paradigm shift from the classical
to the romantic paradigm to show the development of romantic interiority. Finally I
turn to its modern culmination in “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” which provides a
center from which to analyze the ironic dialectic of Men and Women.

Not much attention has been paid to “Artemis Prologizes” as a dramatic
monologue, yet it is integral to Browning’s symbolic design in Men and Women.
DeVane explains that the monologue was originally intended as a prologue to a play
that Browning planned to compose about Hippolytus but did not ever write and that
there is no clear reason as to why he moved it from the Dramatic Lyrics of 1842 into
the revised order of Men and Women; however, the fact that Browning incorporated it
into the revised collection is certainly not an arbitrary decision, but rather reveals the
difference between the classical and the romantic symbol and defines the monologue
as a modern form that derives from romantic epistemology.

It is crucial to Browning’s conception of the ontology of the classical world
that the prologue is spoken by Artemis and not by Hippolytus because it is not
possible to display the interiority of a Greek hero in that his being is inextricably
bound with his external action. As Browning explored in Sordello, in the classical
paradigm the subjective is perfectly fused with the objective world, which means that
classical art manifests spirit by means of the human form and takes the shape of
human gods in contrast to the infinity of the romantic subjective soul that inevitably
exceeds its manifestation. In contrast to the inward-outward manifestation of the
romantic soul, it is represented here as the perfect union of the subjective and the
objective as it finds its consummate symbol in the anthropomorphic god, Artemis. As the Greek mindset projects internal truth into the externality of the gods, Artemis comes down to reinvest in men the truth that she embodies. Artemis’ uncomplicated opening statement of who she is — “I am a goddess of the ambrosial courts, / And save by Here, Queen of Pride, surpassed / By none whose temples whiten this the world” (ll. 1-3) — reflects this unified and externalized form of Greek identity.

The poem’s linguistic sonority and its metrical cadence are intended to echo those of classical Greek prosody; similarly, the poem’s narrative tropes and its incantatory tone are adapted from the epic poetry of that tradition. Yet this is not merely an exercise in form or structure because for Browning these elements were the natural expression of the underlying truth of their age. It is crucial that unlike all of Browning’s other monologues, in “Artemis Prologizes” the language is wholly narrative and the succession of action is a means to an end, while the conjunctions that often commence his sentences spur and impel the narrative sequence. The significance of this narrative mode for Browning’s symbolic plot is rendered more apparent if we remember that when Sordello reflects upon the Greek age where “deeds once sufficed” (5, l. 549) he envisions “deeds in their due gradation till Song dawns” (5, l.560), which traces the transformation from external action that is symbolic in itself to the romantic paradigm where action is derived internally from the spirit. Browning traces this development through “Artemis Prologuizes” to his other monologues in the collection to express the further gradations of spirit that Browning sees throughout history. Thus when Artemis proclaims that “I, in a flood of glory visible, / Stood o’er my dying votary and, deed / By deed, revealed, as all took place, the truth” (ll. 67-9), Browning shows that classical action proceeds from moment to moment without reflection because soul is already embodied in the chain of cause-
Browning’s heavy and pervasive alliteration is unique to this monologue and it asserts the sensuousness of the classical world and its emphasis on the material as the instinctive expression of the ideal. This emphasis on form sets up an ordered natural universe wherein everything has its place; thus Artemis explains that as the moon goddess she is responsible for safeguarding all kinds of pregnant animals and all of the men who offer her sacrifice (ll. 6-12), and she in turn derives power from her supplicants and is bound to them as they are to her (74-83). This reciprocal unity of the classical world is enacted through the inextricable framework of men and the gods, an example of which can be seen in Browning’s detail that Hippolytus’ death is caused by the fact that he cannot jump off his chariot before it crashes: “Hippolutos, whose feet were trammelled fast” (l. 51), “into the fixed boots of the car” (l. 40). Through Artemis’ narrative, Browning shows how the inexorable sequence of events beginning with Hippolytus’ vow of chastity to Artemis, for which he is killed and subsequently saved, comprises discrete and successive actions that express the unified truth that is the order of the Greek world. This is contrasted by Browning in *Sordello* when he shows that for the romantic paradigm action will no longer be external but internal and will be expressed through the spirit and not the body.

Indeed in “Artemis Prologizes” the emphasis is on Hippolytus’ body as the externalized center of the action as opposed to an internal motivation. There are lengthy descriptions of his body as it is torn apart — “that detested beach, was bright with blood / And morsels of flesh” (ll. 58-9) — and put together through the ministrations of Asclepios who “laid the strips and jagged ends of flesh / Even once more, and slacked the sinew’s knot / Of every tortured limb” (ll. 109-11). Furthermore, the family’s mourning of Hippolytus’ death — the grieving cries of “ai
ai” (l. 39) — and Artemis’ call to celebration of his revivification — “oh cheer” (l. 113) — constitute ritualized public reactions to outside events and are in themselves outside events rather than actions based on interior feeling. Thus they are not internal but external, not states of being but events: even death is characterized as a “mere sleep” (l. 112) and as “the event” (l. 121). Even the seemingly divine process of revivification is actually enacted through the material world, as it is a mortal and not a god who performs the action: Artemis explains that Asclepios is able to restore Hippolytus’ body because Apollo taught him “The doctrine of each herb and flower and root, / To know their secret’st virtue and express / The saving soul of all” (ll. 103-5). The fact that the plants have medicinal knowledge to save the body offers a key to the poem because it shows that the soul is located in the natural world in the same way that the soul is infused in the body— the internal is fixed in the external. It is further crucial to note that Hippolytus’ salvation is merely a corporeal restoration rather than the spiritual transportation that will later define the Incarnation in the Christian age.

Browning incorporated “Artemis Prologizes” into the revised romantic drama of *Men and Women* as a contrast from which to affirm the dramatic monologue as a romantic modern form, and this transition from the classical union of the subjective and the objective to the romantic interiority that will define the monologue is explored symbolically through the historical and epistemological contrast that Browning makes between the early and late classical period in “Cleon.” Although Cleon is still part of the classical world, the self-contained perfection of time and place that characterized the early Greeks and that is demonstrated in “Artemis Prologizes” has grown and been diluted into the sprawling cultural empire in which Cleon finds himself; Browning places it historically at the very dawn of Christianity,
just as rumors of Christ's life are beginning to circulate, in order to show that the poet is on the edge of a fading paradigm and also to presage the coming of the romantic age.

Cleon’s responses to the questions posed by Protus make it clear that the emperor has written to the famed poet in the hope that he will be able to solve the existential crisis that plagues the ruler as his spirit has begun to probe for confirmation of its existence beyond death. Cleon perceives an affinity between himself and Protus whereby the emperor’s mastery of the temporal constitutes a step further in the progress of mankind. He sees that Protus: “Hadst ever in thy heart the luring hope / Of some eventual rest a-top of it, / Whence, all the tumult of the building hushed, / Thou first of men mightst look out to the east. / The vulgar saw thy tower: thou sawest the sun (ll. 32-6). While the “vulgar” people can only see the tower that is circumscribed by the temporal, Protus looks to the horizon because he wants to place the progress of his work in the perspective of the infinite.

In responding to Protus’ praise of his consummate talent, Cleon sees the distinction between the intellectual mastery of his own age and the organic wholeness of the early classical man:

We of these latter days, with greater mind
Than our forerunners, since more composite,
Look not so great, beside their simple way,
To a judge who only sees one way at once,
One mind-point, and no other at a time, —
Compares the small part of a man of us
With some whole man of the heroic age,
Great in his way, —not ours, nor meant for ours. (ll. 64-71)
Cleon argues that the intellectual reach of his day far surpasses the totality of the heroic age, yet as the modern “composite” mind is made up of separate parts that were once perfect in and of themselves, it only appears to be inferior to that which came before. Cleon then makes a parallel between the progressive syntheses of these isolated forms and his achievements in art: while he concedes that he has not “chanted verse like Homer’s,” has not “swept string like Terpender” nor “painted men like Phidias” — “I am not as great as they are, point by point” — he believes himself to be nevertheless an improvement beyond them since “I have entered into sympathy / With these four, running these into one soul, / Who, separate, ignored each other’s arts” (ll. 139-45). Cleon likens these first “perfect separate forms” to unified separate shapes that are then overlaid to create the “checkerboard” of the late classical age to demonstrate to the emperor that in his art he has effected a simple refinement of an existing truth.

The poet uses the metaphor of the water in the sphere to show Protus that while he is correct in perceiving that the earlier classical period fulfilled the intention of their age perfectly, it is nevertheless still part of the teleological progress of mankind:

Now mark me! those divine men of old time
Have reached, thou sayest well, each at one point
The outside verge that rounds our faculty;
And where they reached, who can do more than reach?
It takes but little water just to touch
At some one point the inside of a sphere,
And, as we turn the sphere, touch all the rest
In due succession. (ll. 95-102)
In this metaphor, the drops of water are the Greek heroes touching the circumference of their available truth and as such they reached as far as they could go. In turning the sphere so that the water touches all parts of the sphere sequentially, Cleon shows how each age builds upon the pinnacle of knowledge that was reached before. Yet, Cleon exclaims that, while it is easy to see progress, it is more difficult to see how this linear continuation of the mind is just a point in the totality of the soul: “but the finer air / Which not so palpably nor obviously, / Though not less universally, / Can touch the whole circumference of that emptied sphere, / Fills it more fully than the water did (ll. 99-106).

In comparing the transition from the early flourish of the Greek mind to the later cultural empire, Browning brings up the issue of epistemology that is integral to the dialectic of romantic drama. In his discussion of the classical and the romantic paradigms, Friedrich Schlegel asserts that the intuitive totality of the Greeks was “the first flower of youthful imagination, directly joining and imitating what was most immediate and vital in the sensuous world” (Dialogue on Poetry 82). Where the Greeks created through the imagination, Browning makes it clear in “Cleon” that the philosophy of the later period is that of the reason. Thus Cleon answers Protus’ fears about the futility of progress by arguing that the progression of improvement logically infers that the soul should continue its progress as well: “What, and the soul alone deteriorates?” (l. 138). Cleon tells Protus that if he looked back to the “morning of philosophy” (l. 187), he would see that the natural world was perfect and complete in and of itself, but that he would also be able to hypothesize that it would continue its evolution into a yet further stage of completion: “Thou wouldst have seen them perfect, and deduced / The perfectness of others yet unseen” (ll. 192-3). Yet the use of the verb “deduced” emphasizes that Cleon’s conclusion about the progress of the soul
has not been reached through an intuitive, imaginative leap but rather through the logical cause-and-effect calculations of the reason.

Cleon describes to the emperor the next stage in the development of mankind, which is the emergence of the “introactive” soul that can reflect upon and feel the force of its own power. Yet Protus and Cleon both perceive the sadness that is inherent in this progress of self-consciousness. In his Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, August Schlegel uses the term “joy” to express the intuitive totality of the Greek world and uses “desire” to express the romantic reaching for the infinite. When Cleon exclaims that “life’s inadequate to joy, / As the soul sees joy, tempting life to take” he observes that while the soul seeks totality the temporal circumscription of life precludes it. Thus Cleon admits that “I dare at times imagine to my need / Some future state revealed to us by Zeus, / Unlimited in capability / For joy, as this is in desire for joy, / To seek which, the joy-hunger forces us” (ll. 324-5). He dreams of a future condition that might experience totality in the same capacity that he desires it in the present, a future state that he will be impelled to seek through his desire for eternity—his “joy-hunger.”

Yet Cleon’s logical insistence traps him within a temporal scope and prevents an intuitive knowledge of the infinity that he desires. Although the poet has sketched a “fiction” that might reveal the connection between the material and the immaterial, he does not really conceive of it as a truth:

Long since, I imaged, wrote the fiction out,
That he or other God, descended here
And, once for all, showed simultaneously
What, in its nature, never can be shown
Piecemeal or in succession; —showed, I say,
The worth both absolute and relative
Of all His children from the birth of time,
His instruments for all appointed work.
I now go on to image, —might we hear
The judgment which should give the due to each,
Show where the labour lay and where the ease,
And prove Zeus’ self, the latent everywhere!

This is a dream... (ll.115-127)

The nature of Cleon’s dream emphasizes that the relationship between the absolute and the relative cannot be perceived through the reason as it is the faculty that comprehends the world of cause and effect— the “Piecemeal or in succession.” In comparing Cleon to the first flowering of the Greek mind, Browning suggests that it is only through the faculty of imagination or the transcendent intuitions of feeling that mankind can intuit what is at once linear and simultaneous, temporal and eternal. Indeed, it is Cleon’s rational and logical deductions about the soul that deny the possibility of an afterlife: “But, no! / Zeus has not yet revealed it; and, alas! / He must have done so—were it possible!” (ll. 333-5).

In seeking answers to his existential dilemma, Protus asks Cleon to pass another of his letters to Paul, who has begun to spread abroad the news of Jesus Christ, in the hope that the apostle might provide him with the knowledge that he seeks; however, Cleon chastises the emperor for thinking that “a mere barbarian jew” could have the answer to a secret that they themselves do not have access to, proclaiming that such a thought “wrongst our philosophy” (l. 346). Browning means “philosophy” here as a way of looking at the world and he shows through Cleon’s rational rejection of Christianity that the logical deductions of the reason cannot
aspire to the ideal.

Browning places Cleon’s logical conclusions and the connection that he posits between the finite and the infinite against the historical context of the dawn of Christianity to show that it is the Christian Incarnation that forges the new union between the subjective and the objective. As Browning established in *Sordello*, it is the work of the romantic poet who expresses this manifestation of spirit in the forms of art; however, as the romantic soul can never be fully embodied in the material, this manifestation is achieved in art by means of the symbol, which only approximates the relationship between the ideal and the real. That this historical progression is part of the symbolic plot of *Men and Women* is clear from the fact that he follows “Cleon” with “Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli,” which like “Artemis Prologizes” was originally part of *Dramatic Lyrics*. In following “Cleon” with “Rudel,” Browning indicates the epistemological shift from the end of the classical world to the start of the romantic paradigm in art, which the Schlegels argued was first expressed in the love poetry of the troubadours, a point of symbolic transition that Browning explored himself in *Sordello*. Browning’s short poem follows the legend of Rudel, a twelfth century troubadour who fell in love with the lady of Tripoli after hearing of her beauty. When Rudel set off on a pilgrimage to find his love he was taken ill on the journey, but he lived just long enough to see once his lady who had heard of his famous love for her. As “men applaud / In vain this Rudel, he not looking here / But to the East—the East! Go, say this, Pilgrim dear!” (ll. 34-6), Browning shows that he is the prototype of the romantic poet whose art reflects the romantic quest to embody the ideal even though he knows that in part that it will fail.

The monologues of *Men and Women* trace the historical progression of the romantic from the inception of Christianity, through the medieval and the
Renaissance up until the nineteenth century, and as romantic symbols, Browning’s monologues explore different iterations of irony between the relative and the absolute as it manifests in these different stages of history. “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” is an important example of how romantic irony works in Browning’s monologues as the interpolation of the poet’s voice at the close of the poem provides a unique insight into how the dramatic persona represents the ontology of the modern mind as the culmination of romantic interiority. Indeed, unlike the perfect fusion of the internal and the internal in the Greek world represented in “Artemis’ Prologue,” Browning explains that the Bishop’s monologue is essentially a problem of manifestation; like Chiappino’s monologue in A Soul’s Tragedy, it displays the tension between his “poetry” and his “prose:”

For Blougram, he believed, say, half he spoke.

The other portion, as he shaped it thus

For argumentatory purposes,

He felt his foe was foolish to dispute.

Some arbitrary accidental thoughts

That crossed his mind, amusing because new,

He chose to represent as fixtures there,

Invariable convictions (such as they seemed

Beside his interlocutor’s loose cards

Flung down daily, and not the same way twice

While certain hell-deep instincts, man’s weak tongue

Is never bold to utter in their truth

Because styled hell-deep (‘t is an old mistake

To place hell at the bottom of the earth)
He ignored these, —not having in readiness
Their nomenclature and philosophy:
He said true things but called them by wrong names (ll. 990-6)

Browning’s depiction of Blougram’s instincts as “hell-deep” utilizes the image of hell as a spatial metaphor to denote the raw, amorphous realm of the soul. Following Schopenhauer in his conviction that music is the most immediate manifestation of the will, Browning also uses the image of hell in “Abt Vogler” to visualize the notes that manifest his soul, and again in “Charles Avison” to depict the “abysmal” groundless realm of spirit. For Browning, the noumenal is both “hell-deep” and “heaven-high” because the soul has both spiritual potentiality that seeks to find form in the world and also a transcendent goal to strive towards. That Browning’s interpolation offers an existential summation of the monologue can also be seen when he interjects in parenthesis his conviction that it an “old mistake / To place hell at the bottom of the earth” as it suggests that the state of hell, or to be fallen, is not below earth but is actually in embodiment— in the many diverse symbols that at once express and obscure their divine foundation. In being “styled hell-deep,” Blougram’s instincts are profound—as its etymological meaning conveys—but he cannot impart these deepest instincts because language— “man’s weak tongue” — which belongs to the realm of conceptual thought, is unable to express the ineffable. Browning also tells the reader that Blougram’s monologue is a problem of “philosophy,” which, as in “Cleon,” brings up the question of epistemology in the poem, and asks the reader to consider how Blougram and Gigadibs each approach this tension between the temporal and the spiritual.

This tension is expressed through the interaction of Blougram with his implied listener, the journalist Gigadibs, where the Bishop address Gigadibs’ assumption—
and the assumption of his age—that theology and religion are the same thing.

Browning’s concept of faith and religion is not tied to a theological position, the specific creeds and dogmas of theology are merely the particular expression or material form that embodies the ideas of religion, and living form is that which still has an organic connection with the truth that it bodies forth. This has an epistemological significance for Browning because it is fancy and feeling that perceives form as the embodiment of internal truth whereas the reason can only apprehend form in its empirical relations. Browning already explored this idea in the tragedy of Luria when Luria, who embodied the intuition of the East was able to show the intellect of the West that their forms were merely founded on tradition and no longer had an organic connection to the inward idea. Thus in “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” romantic irony arises in the discrepancy that Browning perceives between Roman Catholic theology as form and the underlying essence of Christianity, and the way in which Gigadibs and the Bishop respond to the space between them.

Browning makes it clear in the monologue that Gigadibs’ “philosophy” is that of the reason and we know this because in using cause-and-effect logic, he argues that if the empirical, historical form of Christianity has been disproved, it necessarily follows that the inner idea that it supported is invalidated as well. Browning sets off in parentheses the Bishop’s clarification of Gigadibs’ premise about faith in order to draw attention to the fact that Blougram is aware of and is responding to the fact that Gigadibs’ assumption about the nature of belief is contingent on its empirical validity:

Why first, you don’t believe, you don’t and can’t,

(Not statedly, that is, and fixedly
And absolutely and exclusively)

In any revelation called divine.
No dogmas nail your faith—and what remains
   But say so, like the honest man you are?

First, therefore, overhaul theology! (ll. 150-6)

Based on his rational evaluation of the Church, Gigadibs accuses the Bishop of being hypocritical, since as a learned man, he cannot possibly defend all of the theological tenets of Catholicism, and therefore it follows that he cannot possibly have faith or really “believe.”

Blougram tells Gigadibs that he is fully aware that the default position of the age is unbelief. Where it was once belief it is now unbelief: instead of the calling the chessboard white with black squares on it, we now call it black with white squares on it. The foundation of Gigadibs’ argument is that it is not possible to stand on both squares at the same time—one must have either complete faith or complete doubt.

Browning brings this back to epistemology as the monologue implies that, along with unbelief, the default epistemological faculty of the age is the reason. In *A Blot in the Scutcheon*, Browning revealed his conviction that the reason can only deal with polarities and as such it cannot see how the relative is part of the absolute. Blougram echoes this view in his metaphor of “the gross weights, course scales, and labels broad” that Gigadibs uses to put men into categories of weight to measure belief and unbelief without taking into account the “thousand diamond weights between”—the subtle measures that make up the whole spectrum of faith (ll. 403-4). According to this reasoning, Blougram is either a believing bishop and therefore a fool or an unbelieving bishop and therefore a knave. As a result:

   Your picked Twelve, you’ll find,
   Profess themselves indignant, scandalized
   At thus being held unable to explain
How a superior man who disbelieves

May not believe as well: that's Schelling’s way! (ll. 407-11)

It is possible for Schelling to believe and disbelieve at the same time because he sees, like Browning, the material forms of the world, including theology, as the evolving manifestations of the divine – and as such belief and unbelief are not antithetical. It is significant that Blougram refers to Schelling here as it reveals the importance of German idealism for Browning’s emphasis on embodiment and the importance of recognizing the difference between external form and inward soul.

As the reason cannot separate material form from the transcendent content, it can only take the historicity and temporality of the Church as the basis of belief. For Gigadibs, if the Church and belief are based on a lie, using cause-and-effect reasoning, since you cannot get to truth from a lie, it is not possible to reach the ideal through belief. Thus we know from Blougram’s response that Gigadibs has said that he will seek truth in unbelief, and that he sees himself as right and the Bishop as wrong.

Blougram admits that he cannot express his intuitions about faith as they lie outside of the bounds of the reason: “Meanwhile, I know where difficulties lie / I could not, cannot solve, nor ever shall, / So give up hope accordingly to solve— / (To you and over the wine)” (ll. 165-8). Thus he says that in defending himself against Gigadibs’ judgment, he will meet the writer on his own ground—the assumption that it is not possible to believe and disbelieve—which Browning has shown is founded on the reason. Blougram makes it clear that when he admits his unbelief, he is only speaking about the nature of belief that is based on Gigadibs’ own assumptions: “I do not believe— / If you’ll accept no faith that is not fixed, / Absolute and exclusive, as you say. / You’re wrong— I mean to prove it in due time” (ll. 161-4). He emphasizes
this several times through the monologue when he reminds his opponent that “I mean to meet you on your own premise” (l. 171) and again in parentheses: “In our common primal element / Of unbelief (we can’t believe, you know— / We’re still at that admission, recollect” (ll. 439-41). Thus it is not that the Bishop does not have faith, but that he knows he cannot defend his belief within the realm of the reason; therefore, he chooses to utilize Gigadibs’ own premises to supplant his opponent: “‘On the whole,’ he thought, I justify myself / ‘On every point where cavillers like this / ‘Oppugn my life: he tries one kind of fence, / ‘I close, he’s worsted, that’s enough for him (ll. 997-1003). However, when the Bishop says, “‘He’s on the ground; if ground should break away / ‘I take my stand on, there’s a firmer yet / ‘Beneath it, both of us may sink and reach” (ll. 1001-1003), he acknowledges that although his argument meets Gigadibs in the realm of reason, the truths intuited by the soul will always precede and supersede the conclusions of the mind.

If, according to reason, one must accept the totality of theology to have belief, Blougram’s argument to Gigadibs implies that in choosing unbelief he has no form through which to realize his search for truth—an idea he first explored in A Soul’s Tragedy. Like Chiappino, it only results in an abstract idealism that cannot act in any way upon the world:

Is— not to fancy what were fair in life
Provided it could be, —but, finding first
What may be, then find out how to make it fair
Up to our means: a very different thing!
No abstract intellectual plan of life
Quite irrespective of life’s plainest laws,
But one man, a man, who is man and nothing more,
May lead within a world which (by your leave)

Is Rome or London—not Fool’s-paradise. (ll. 88-96)

In using his own reason against him, Blougram argues that Gigadibs founders in unbelief because he cannot realize any of the noble truths that he seeks, whereas since he pretends to have complete belief and chooses to be a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church, his hypocrisy means that he does not aim as high but that in doing so he realizes more. He uses several metaphors to express this logic: Blougram compares himself to Shakespeare, who had imagination but also wanted to realize material things — as evidenced by the bard's purchasing of a coat of arms, owning a house and engaging in commerce — exclaiming that although Shakespeare aimed higher in his art he realized less in his life than the Bishop who has secured all of the material gains of the Catholic Church (of course this a deliberately facetious view of art and one that he qualifies later in his argument). Blougram also uses the metaphor of packing for a voyage to show that while Gigadibs brings his fine paintings and furniture, his abstract ideals, they do not fit to the circumscribed size of the berth; therefore, although Gigadibs disapproves of the arrangement of Blougram’s own cabin and ponders what he would have done with the design, he has been left without any furnishings to realize his vision. The Bishop also uses the metaphor of night and day to show that although Gigadibs’ recognizes the night and its dreams, it is at the expense of the Bishop’s emphasis on the day, which is the realm of action and realization. Moreover, if Blougram is dishonourable, he asks Gigadibs to consider whether Napoleon would be his “pattern man” who seeks an ideal; however, he argues that without a form to express belief, Gigadibs cannot see the higher ideal—the star that impels Napoleon—but, in the same way as Berthold, he can see only the shimmer of the star's light, which in this case is Napoleon's seeming meaningless and
mad action in the temporal world.

Blougram, who has based his argument up until this point on the default position of unbelief, now switches his perspective to argue from the foundation of belief and observes that in starting from belief, his previous argument starts to deteriorate. The Bishop declares that “Enthusiasm is the best thing” — which he means in its etymological sense of being divinely inspired — although he maintains that “we can’t command it” (ll. 556-7). Blougram goes on to express his conviction that whether this inspiration is a “mad dream or God’s very breath, belief’s fire, once in us, / Makes of all else mere stuff to show itself” (ll. 559-60). Returning to the question of epistemology, he argues that it is only through inspiration — the divine feeling that Browning always contrasts to the reason — that it is possible to see the semblance of material forms in their true relation to the noumenal truths that they express. Yet because the default position of the age is disbelief people only care about the “flare,” which, like the shimmer of Napoleon’s star, is the action that belief produces in the temporal and not the ideal that impels it.

Although Blougram admires Luther, he feels that he cannot follow in his footsteps because Luther achieved all that he set out to do in his age and in his own time “Strauss is the next advance” (l. 576). Yet Strauss’ advance is a defence of belief through the reason, which leads the Bishop to ask: “What can I gain on the denying side? / Ice makes no conflagration” (l. 580-1) in contrast to Luther’s inspiration that shows us how “fire and life / Are all, dead matter’s nothing” (l. 557-8). Even though Blougram admits that he cannot know empirically whether Luther or Strauss is right, he proclaims that he would rather be Luther as it was he “who secured / A real heaven in his heart throughout his life” (l. 598-90), which Browning shows is outside the scope of the reason.
In continuing to look at faith through the faculty of reason, however, Gigadibs argues that there is no point in having such imperfect faith: it is not viable to swing between the two poles of complete faith and doubt represented by Paul and Strauss. Yet it is at this point of the argument when the Bishop finds that he is back on Christian ground — the foundation that Browning takes to be the eternal idea of Christianity that precedes all the forms that bring it forth:

It is the idea, the feeling and the love
God means mankind should strive for and show forth,
Whatever be the process to that end, —
And not historic knowledge, logic sound,
And metaphysical acumen, sure! (ll. 621-5)

The Bishop juxtaposes history and logic, which endeavors to find the empirical validity of Christianity, with metaphysical thought, which seeks for knowledge of an abstract ideal, in order to show that it is in the gap between them — the space of romantic irony — that the soul is able to see how the real is always informed by the ideal. Raymond Williams argues that the similarity between Browning’s beliefs and Blougram’s at this point of the monologue suggests that Browning finds himself tangled in casuistry, however, I would argue that it reveals the connection between the monologue and romantic drama because the Maker-See shows that it is in this space that the cooperating fancy of the reader can perceive the relationship between the real and the ideal. Indeed it is within the poles of belief and unbelief that Browning’s deepest convictions are conveyed: that as embodied beings we cannot fully know God and that only in the striving can we perceive intimations of the divine.

It is this ironic space between ideal and the real that connects “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” across the collection of *Men and Women* conceptually with
“An epistle containing the strange medical experience of Karshish, the Arab physician” where Abib, who is the recipient of Karshish’s letter, represents the empirical scientific method, which is juxtaposed with the total vision of Lazarus after he has been raised by Christ from the dead. Significantly it is within this discrepancy between the particular and the universal that Karshish can intimate the divine. Indeed it is between belief (Lazarus) and disbelief (Abib) that the essence of Christianity for Browning can be apprehended — the love of God that is expressed in the Incarnation and that will define the symbolic art of the romantic objective poet.

Blougram explains to Gigadibs that the problem with unbelief, as the writer defines it, is that it still leaves an intuition of something beyond empirical fact. The Bishop also addressed this at the very opening of the monologue when he exclaims that:

Just when we are safest, there’s a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one’s death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides, —
And that’s enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as nature’s self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again, —
The grand Perhaps! (ll. 182-90)

In these moments, the Bishop feels that it is possible to discover a way in which what has been disproved might also be true: “Why not, ‘the Way, the Truth, the Life”’ (l. 197). Returning to epistemology, Blougram asks Gigadibs whether “Trust you an instinct silenced long ago / That will break silence and enjoin you love / What
mortified philosophy is hoarse, / And all in vain, with bidding you despise? (ll. 630-4). Using himself as a parallel to the question of the historicity of Christ, Blougram argues that the “mortified philosophy” of the reason cannot form a favourable notion of him “Because of contradictions in the facts. / One proves, for instance, he was born in Rome, / This Blougram—yet throughout the tales of him / I see he figures as an Englishman ” (ll. 639-42). Blougram declares that “Well, the two things are reconcilable” (l. 643) but that Gigadbids is not interested in discovering how.

Although Blougram suggests that the idea of Christianity can still be true even though its historicity has been disproved, he does not seek a new form of expression. Much criticism of the monologue has seen the Bishop’s ultimate failure to lie in his materialism and in the fact that he does not strive to be better than the way God has made him, but I would argue that this analysis misses some of the complexity of the monologue as a romantic drama whereby this tragic space facilitates a recognition in the reader that material forms are evolving embodiments of the ideal. While the Bishop’s argument makes it clear that he can separate the idea of Christianity from its manifestation in form through his intuition, he departs from Browning in that he concedes to the faculty of reason, not only in his argument with Gigadibs but also in his life. Blougram has decided that if the default position of the age is unbelief, he must accept all of theology, which includes all of the miracles that the Church purports to be empirical reality, because if one part of belief is disproved, the faculty of reason will necessarily invalidate it all. According to the Bishop this is why:

I say, I see all,

And swear to each detail the most minute

In what I think a man’s face—you, mere cloud:

I swear I hear him speak and see him wink,
For fear if I drop the emphasis,
Mankind may doubt if there’s a cloud at all. (ll. 866-11)

He fears that in discarding any part of the established form through which belief is realized, he will only continue to see further aspects that need changing: “There’s ever a next in size, now grown as big, / That meets the knife—I cut and cut again! / First cut the Liquefaction, what comes last / But Fichte’s clever cut at God himself?” (ll. 741-4). Blougram’s reference to Fichte here, as well as Schelling earlier, reveals Browning’s awareness of trends in philosophical idealism and the Bishop is clearly referring to the accusations of atheism levelled against Fichte after the publication of his essay “On the Ground of Our Belief in a Divine World-Governance” (1798). To avoid any such ambiguity, Blougram defers to the reason and goes to the other extreme in choosing Catholicism, which he declares to be “The most pronounced moreover, fixed, precise / And absolute form of faith in the whole world— / Accordingly, most potent of all forms / For working on the world” (ll. 306-9). Thus Blougram chooses a form even if he does not believe that it is the living embodiment of Christianity in much the same way that Strafford clings to the king even though he knows that he no longer embodies the truth of his age.

The irony of the monologue—that comprises the tragic space between the ideal and the real—is that although Blougram perceives the discrepancy between Christian truths (the ideal) and Catholic theology (the real), he does not have the fire to break with an established form to find a fresh and living expression of the ideal. Although he admires Luther’s inspirational fire above Strauss’ icy doubt, Blougram also ends up defending faith through the reason. This is why the Bishop admits to Gigadibs that the men who seek to realize their intuitions are better than him:

A zealot with a mad ideal in reach,
A poet just about to print his ode,
A statesman with a scheme to stop this war,
An artist whose religion is his art,
I should have nothing to object! Such men
Carry the fire, all things grow warm to them,
Their drugget’s worth my purple, they beat me.

But you—you’re just as little as I—.” (ll. 936-43)

All these men who “carry the fire”—who have inspiration—live their lives striving to embody an ideal. Carlyle proclaims in his Lectures on Hero-Worship that it is the duty of man to unfold and act upon his inward perception of the ideal, and Blougram acknowledges that those heroes who seek to realize truth are superior to himself but also shows his opponent that in deferring to the totality of theology, he is no worse than Gigadibs, who himself only views belief through the reason.

Not only does Browning’s “Bishop Blougram” demonstrate the romantic epistemology of the dramatic monologue through irony, the transformation in Gigadibs’ perspective also offers a unique insight into the change in perception that Browning hopes to bring about by means of irony in the monologue. That the space of recognition intended for the reader is also elicited in the auditor makes “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” integral to understanding the connection between the monologue form and romantic drama. When Browning explains that “Something had struck him in the “Outward-Bound” / Another way than Blougrams’s purpose was,” he implies that Gigadibs has seen through the example of Blougram’s life that the reason will not enable him to pursue the ideal.

In his closing interjection, Browning explains that Gigadibs did not purchase “cabin-furniture / But settler’s-implements (enough for three)” to take to Australia
where “there, I hope, / By this time he has tested his first plough, / And studied his last chapter of St. John” (ll. 1008-14). This is rather a vague conclusion, but if we look again to Carlyle we see the significance in Gigadibs’ decision to settle and work upon an uninhabited land. For Carlyle, symbolically speaking, “work” is the endeavour to make the ideal real and in Past and Present he exclaims: “Labour is Life: from the inmost heart of the Worker rises his god-given Force, the sacred celestial Life-essence breathed into him by Almighty God; from his inmost heart awakens him to all nobleness, — to all knowledge, 'self-knowledge' and much else, so soon as Work fitly begins” (164). Work is how man acts upon his inspiration and Gigadibs’ decision to buy tools instead of furniture suggests that his adventure is an endeavor to forge new forms to embody soul.

Through the dialectic between Blougram and Gigadibs, Browning emphasizes the different epistemological responses to the question of material forms and symbolic embodiment, and this is how the monologue is juxtaposed to the others in Men and Women to create a broader dialectic across the series of poems. Although Blougram emphasizes form through the acceptance of theology in his argument with Gigadibs, he does not adhere to the rigid totality of theology that imprisons Johannes Agricola in his own ego, and although Blougram enjoys the material comforts of the Church, he does not have the same level of materialism that is demonstrated in “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St Praxed.” Indeed in his discussion of faith and intuition, the Bishop reveals his awareness of the distinction that Browning sees between the Platonic Ideas and their particular material expressions, which places him conceptually between “Pictor Ignitos” and “Andrea Del Sarto.” On the cusp of the Renaissance, Pictor Ignotis feels that he has the fire of inspiration, as Raphael does, that could enable him to break away from the old forms of ecclesiastical art, but he
fears for the future of art’s sacredness outside of the Church. Andrea Del Sarto sees that the arm in Raphael’s painting is not empirically correct, but he acknowledges that Raphael’s composition is superior to his own as it is the soul — which can never be fully embodied — that makes a true work of art; and if Raphael is the romantic artist, it is Fra Lippo Lippi who is the Maker-See — the artist who recreates the phenomenal world so as to reveal the soul that is embodied within it.

The relationship between soul and its embodiment leads to Browning’s concluding poem “One Word More” that is addressed to Elizabeth, which bookends his opening poem “Transcendentalism” and is critical for understanding the relationship for Browning between philosophical idealism, the concept of romantic subjectivity and symbolic form. “One Word More” is an important statement of his poetics as it explores the way in which the poetry of self-expression relates to objective poetry, but it is important to note that when Browning refers to self-expression in the poem he intends the imperfect embodiment of the transcendental self, as he reiterates through Sordello. Browning admired Elizabeth for what he saw as the expression of her essential self in her poetry and he laments the fact that he is unable to do the same. In a letter to his future wife he writes that the “scenes and song-scrap”s of Bells and Pomegranates:

are such mere and very escapes of my inner power, — which lives in me like the light in those crazy Mediterranean phares I have watched at sea — wherein the light is ever revolving in a dark gallery, bright and alive, and only after a weary interval leaps out, for a moment, from the one narrow chink, and then goes on with the blind wall between it and you.

Browning uses the imagery of the burning light to express the fire of soul that seeks to find form but then recedes again into potentiality; therefore he says that “I never have
begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end, — “R.B. a poem” (10, 69-72).

In “One Word More,” which he signed “RB,” Browning expresses his desire to find a language for expressing his love for his wife — a love that both arises from and expresses the transcendent source of his inward self.

It is clear that Browning sees embodiment as the next stage of idealism and as the culmination of the romantic inward spirit in that he prefaced his own search for a language that will verbalize his love with similar artistic pursuits by Raphael and Dante. Significantly in *Sordello* it is Dante who, as Friedrich Schlegel also observes, forges the new romantic symbolism that unites religion and poetry; in “Andrea Del Sarto” and “Pictor Ignotis,” Browning shows that it is Raphael’s humanistic art that is the next stage in the embodiment of the transcendent romantic soul even though the romantic soul will always exceed its expression. Browning tells an anecdote about how Dante and Raphael endeavoured to work in different artistic mediums to articulate their love with the hope that in giving less thought to material form they might be able to render a less mediated utterance of truth. Browning exclaims that we covet these works, as he says in the *Essay on Shelley* that we covet the work of the subjective poet because they are works that express most clearly the soul of the artist.

In trying to give form to the inward soul, however, it is inevitable that “Heaven’s gift takes earth’s abatement” (l.73). Browning turns to Moses here, in the same way that he figures as an example of the “Maker-See” in *Sordello*, to show that although Moses revealed to the Jewish people an act of God in the world, in striking the rock “Even he, the minute makes immortal, / Proves, perchance, but mortal in the minute” and “Desecrates the deed in doing” (ll. 76-78). Browning proceeds to liken Moses’ lack of appreciation at the hands of the Jewish people to the criticism that Browning himself has received as a poet, and while the people desire to see in Moses
the magical brilliance of one who bears witness to royal decrees from God, Browning ponders whether the prophet might ever have wanted to express his connection to the divine through his personal love of a woman.

Similarly to Dante and Raphael, Browning proclaims that just this one time he will try to express his love in poetry. Browning points out that up until now, Elizabeth has only seen him write objective poetry, the poetry that Sordello foresees as the next stage in romantic idealism: “by my fancy, / Enter each and all, and use their service, / Speak from every mouth, — the speech, a poem” (ll. 129-32). The speech is a poem because he shares with Shelley the conviction that “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (313). Thus in an early letter to Elizabeth, Browning says that “I only make men and women speak, give you truth broken into prismatic hues” (10, 21-23), which shows that he saw his dramatic personas as various refractions or embodiments of his own white light, the transcendent totality of his own subjective soul; however, this one time, Browning says to Elizabeth that he wants to speak in his own voice:

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 (ll. 137-3)

Yet when Browning tries to speak, the only thing he can say to his wife is to ask her to look upon his objective poetry. Returning to the same symbolic language that he utilized for his epistemological demarcation between soul and mind in Luria and The
“Return of the Druses,” Browning declares that the “heart” perceives the love that comes from the source of his soul and the “brain” is how he fashions it in the material world. Like Sordello, Browning cannot express fully his subjective transcendent soul—“Poor the speech;’ be how I speak for all things”—but he can strive to body it forth in his new mythology—the multifarious symbols that make up the manifested spiritual lives of his dramatic personas. Browning reiterates the importance of symbolic embodiment not only for his poetics but also for his epistemological stance when he says to Elizabeth in the first stanza to “Take them, Love, the book and me together: / Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also” (ll. 3-4).

Browning uses the image of the dark side and the visible side of the moon to symbolize the two aspects of the world and mankind that are dependent on and inseparable from the other: the side that looks to the inward-infinite and the side that looks to the outward-embodiment. Browning fancies that if the moon fell in love with a mortal she would reveal the side that faces inward to the noumenal rather than outward to the phenomenal: she would reveal the half-hidden shard crystals of the iceberg under the ocean or its surface paved with sapphire like the path that God stood upon to face Moses.

Figuring himself and his wife as the moon, Browning exclaims that he is fortunate to have these “two soul-sides,” “one to face the world with, / One to show a woman when he loves her!” (ll. 185-6). Therefore, although Browning cannot fully express the infinity of his soul in poetry, his wife knows it in his personal love for her, and in turn although Elizabeth’s readers see her from the world side, she does not fully express her soul in her poetry but only in her love for him. Thus for Browning: “the best is when I glide from out them, / Cross a step or two of dubious twilight, / Come out on the other side, the novel / Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of, /
Where I hush and bless myself with silence” (ll. 193-97). What Browning here means by the silent side of the moon is explained by Carlyle’s definition of the romantic symbol wherein speech and silence are blended together, speech being of the embodied world and silence of the infinite; thus, Browning is saying that to bathe in the light of his love for Elizabeth is to bask in the noumenal aspect of the world.

As a man and as an artist, Browning wants to body forth his love for Elizabeth, but he admits to his wife that he will never find a form “that should all-express me” (l.111). Although “Rafael of the dear Madonnas” and “Dante of the dread Inferno” wrote one song and drew one angel, Browning can only sing Dante’s song in his brain — through fashioning — and carry Raphael’s angel in his heart. The idea of song here looks back to the call for song in his opening poem “Transcendentalism: a Poem in Twelve Books” because for Browning song, as the expression of the soul, can only be known in its manifestation, which is best represented in dramatic form and yet can only ever achieve an approximation. In “One Word More” Browning shows that the work of the “synthetist” poet is to explore through the irony inherent in the many symbols derived from the formed world — his men and women — how the objective world is but an embodiment of the subjective soul that is divine, and like God’s love that is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the work of the romantic poet is an act of love that reveals the relationship between the relative and the absolute. This concept of romantic drama is the foundation of both Browning’s plays and his monologues and by enacting embodiment throughout his dramatic poetry he pioneers a completely new and innovative Christian poetics. In becoming the synthetist romantic poet, the Maker-See, Browning occupies body and soul, the real and the ideal, a transcendental dialectic that he does not attempt to resolve but rather resolves to attempt.
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