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## “UPROAR IN THE ECHO”: BROWNING’S VITALIST BEGINNINGS

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*By Leslie White*

IN LETTERS TO Mrs. Ernest Benzon and Mrs. Thomas FitzGerald, Browning claims affinity with the great philosopher of the Will, Schopenhauer, and asserts that elements of vitalism are the “substratum” of his life and work. These letters confirm the poet’s place in the line of vitalist thought shaped by Schopenhauer, the English Romantics, and Carlyle and further developed by Nietzsche, George Bernard Shaw, Henri Bergson, and D.H. Lawrence. Vitalism resists precise definition; each theorist advances a singular terminology and application. Schopenhauer’s vitalism may be understood from his concept of cosmic Will; Carlyle’s from the essential presence of energy, movement, and change in the world. Bergson used the term *élan vital* and Lawrence such characteristically vague phrases as “sense of truth” and “supreme impulse” to express faith in forces operating beneath or hovering above the surface of life. Broadly put, when a rational orientation to the world ceased to be adequate, when rationalism devolved into a falsification of reality’s authentic energy, major vitalists came into existence and posited as the true reality a primitive, universal force of which everything in that reality is an objectification. Unlike other vitalists in the English tradition, such as Blake and Lawrence, Browning was not comfortable with cosmic images. His vitalism breaks from the main line to focus on the individual human will, which he saw as an intuitive impulse and as a means to realize the self and locate its place in the world. For Browning, the comprehension of life’s vital movement lay in the dynamic energy of willed action.

During the first year of their correspondence, Browning received Helen Zimmern's biography of Schopenhauer from Mrs. Fitzgerald; after he delayed looking into it for some six weeks, he read with such "satisfaction that – a very unusual circumstance – [he] at once turned back to the beginning and proceeded to the end a second time" (Browning, Letter to Benzon). Although the poet admitted having had "no great interest in what the name [Schopenhauer] might represent" and acknowledged that "Schopenhauer had been hitherto a mere name to me," Zimmern's biography seems at least to have entertained Browning, even stirred something in him. That Browning had not read Schopenhauer and apparently was unfamiliar with his "grand discovery" before 1876 is somewhat surprising, especially when we consider the poet's interest in German literature and philosophy. More odd than Browning's unfamiliarity with Schopenhauer is the fact that he seems to have had only superficial knowledge of other more famous German philosophers. In 1882, during a meeting of the Browning Society, the poet would declare, perhaps truthfully, perhaps simply to quell bothersome questions, "Once for all, I have never read a line, original or translated, by Kant, Schelling, or Hegel in my whole life" (Irvine and Honan 502).

Though unfamiliar with Schopenhauer before 1876, Browning nevertheless could write confidently in both letters about striking similarities between the philosopher's "grand discovery" and his own vitalist ontology:

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 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. (Browning, Letter to Benzon)

And from a second letter, written some two months later:

What struck me so much in that Life of Schopenhauer which you gave me, was that doctrine which he considered his grand discovery – and which I had been persuaded of from my boyhood – and have based my whole life upon: – that the soul is above and *behind* the intellect which is merely its servant. . . . The consequences of this doctrine were so momentous to me . . . that I am sure there must be references to and deductions from it throughout the whole of my works. . . . (McAleeer 34–35)

Browning's remarks are bold and striking, but since he claims that he had barely heard of Schopenhauer before 1876, we need not address the question of direct influence. Yet Browning's insistence that the doctrine in question was “so momentous” to him demands that we look closely at his comments. How is Browning defining “Soul” here? What is it to claim that the “Soul” is “above and behind the intellect”? And should we regard Browning's identification of “Soul” with Schopenhauer's “Will” as a daring equation or as a fundamental misunderstanding of Schopenhauer? We should begin by defining the Schopenhauerian “grand discovery” (if indeed it was Schopenhauer's) that Browning “based [his] whole life upon” and that exists as the “substratum” of his writings.

We may gain an adequate notion of the character of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* by focusing on its central concept of Will – a blind, striving, pervasive force and, for Schopenhauer, the essence of reality itself. Schopenhauer maintains that man acts according to the prompting of this cosmic Will, a naturalistic force, and not according to any intellectual system. “This Will,” he writes, “and this alone gives man the key to his own existence, reveals to him the significance, shows him the inner mechanism of his being, of his actions, of his movements” (Schopenhauer 130). Yet for Schopenhauer, the Will is doomed to privation; it strives because it is unfulfilled. Where it does find fulfillment, that fulfillment turns out to be illusion, and the human will itself alternates between suffering and boredom. Browning's equation of the power of the Soul with Schopenhauer's Will is certainly ambiguous but finally not problematic as we see when we explore the poet's beginnings as a vitalist poet. He uses both terms frequently, interchangeably, and so variously that it is unnecessary if not impossible to reach an encompassing definition of either. “Soul,” “Will,” “principle of restlessness,” “impulse,” “tendency,” “desire” – all convey Browning's faith in intuition.

It is highly possible that Browning got his ideas on the will and vitalism from Schopenhauer indirectly, either on the strength of his attachment to the Romantics, or to Carlyle, or as they were made available to him as part of the intellectual/cultural discourse of the 30s and 40s. The sources of Browning's vitalism are, however, less significant than the fact of its presence and its place in his thought and poetic development. Essentially Browning takes the energy and a bit of the mystery of a Schopenhauerian Will and humanizes

it, examining the faculty as “an effective power for realizing ourselves and for consummating our relationship with the world” (Cooke 14). The individuality of the self as a precise, unique manifestation of the Universal Will that one finds central to vitalist thought reminds us of Browning’s stress on “incidents in the development of the soul” (Jack 156); exploring this development would remain throughout his career his only concern.

A version of this cosmic Will of Schopenhauer’s is in back of Browning’s taut psychological realism. For Browning, each of us is an objectification of some prevailing power, which, as it moves through the individual human will, invests it with the impulse to “become.” In this transference, the human will itself can become purposive and takes “the form of the will-to-individuality, to identity, to self-hood” (Peckham 149). This is Browning’s vitalism: its character is bound up in the purposive striving of the individual will; its value lies in the ability to overcome any sort of deterministic Will or causal Necessity, or the constraints and hypocrisies of the complex civilization that was coming into being. In this connection, I would argue that Browning’s most characteristic writings are a record of the individual human will and of all that stifled it and of all that might fulfill it. When we look to determine the fundamental character and form that Browning’s vitalism takes, which necessarily involve an articulation of his theory of the will, we need not go further than the long poems of the 1830s—*Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello*.

This early poetry is a poetry of personal rebellion and of longing for transcendence that diffuses, that loses control even of itself. Finding subjectivism destructive, the poet seeks annihilation of self-consciousness by immersion in it—a paradox of Romanticism that can, on the one hand, power the most consequential literature and, on the other, exhaust talent with terrific speed. These poems declare that one must be in the constant process of creating oneself through some meaningful, radical action if one is to realize the soul’s possibility and measure its dimension in a culture that often asks little and promises only safety. If this poetry ultimately fails as art, it manages to produce a brand of vitalism, defined in terms of an intuitive will, that seeks freedom from tradition, influence, the coercive power of audience.

*Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello* possess an element of the demonic, that is, real life seeking a perverted form, misdirected vital

energy seemingly bent more on destruction than creation. David Shaw has identified the problem in *Pauline* as “the speaker’s inability to escape his own limited perspective. Instead of trying to understand other points of view, he identifies God, Pauline, and Shelley with himself” and mistakes “his own point of view for the total truth . . .” (Shaw 13). The speaker’s failure to shape a poetic experience and project it beyond the immediate subverts his artistic impulse and mires him in vague self-contemplation:

Oh Pauline, I am ruined who believed  
That though my soul had floated from its sphere  
Of wild dominion into the dim orb  
Of self – that it was strong and free as ever!  
It has conformed itself to that dim orb. . . .  
(lines 89–93)

Beneath the speaker’s despair and regret, though, lies a kind of salvation, a relentless vitality that sustains him during his reckless movement through the poem. He is “made up of an intensest life” (268), and in the absence of poetic direction and artistic will relies on “a principle of restlessness / Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all” (277–78). From this “intensest life” of “passions, feelings, powers” (271) rises the steadfast imagination and with it the promise of locating form, subject, style; but the speaker is so overcome by the presence of this imaginative power that he is unsure how to channel it. If intellectually he does not understand his principal objective, somehow he intuits that he must transcend (and transform) the artistic limits he has inherited and learn something of their worth to him as a poet.

*Pauline* is a poem of rough movement, its terrain a pattern of withdrawal and tenuous emergence that mirrors the speaker’s alternating mental states of bondage and escape, underscoring a fierce need to exceed his limitations, to rid his spirit of a debilitating egocentrism. By frequently pairing words and phrases such as “unchained,” “unlocked,” “darkness chained,” “restraint,” and “clay prison” with “chainless,” “wandering,” “set free,” “energies,” and “struggling aims,” Browning reveals the speaker’s divided inner life, the poem’s only landscape. The crucial passage in *Pauline* in this regard shows a dynamic soul quickened by an inexhaustible energy that seems ready to erupt into “some state of life unknown” (600):

I cannot chain my soul: it will not rest  
 In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere:  
 It has strange impulse, tendency, desire,  
 Which nowise I account for nor explain,  
 But cannot stifle, being bound to trust  
 All feelings equally, to hear all sides:  
 How can my life indulge them? . . .  
 (593–99)

Eager to confront the conflicts of this life, yet confused by and fearful of their consequences, the speaker, although obviously aware of the energy that moves through him, is unsure of either its source or the extent of its power. He knows only that this is a will to freedom and an escape from tyranny of considerable dimension, whether it be social, political, artistic, or personal. Browning himself would come to realize that this will is what is most distinctively human; he comes to feel that man's most profound motive is a religious urge to destroy the obsolete and the ineffectual and to create a new order.

But at this point in the poem, the speaker laments his inability to force his energies toward "one end," this end being the splendor of an absolute, which he can only identify as a "hunger but for God" (821):

I envy – how I envy him whose soul  
 Turns its whole energies to some one end,  
 To elevate an aim, pursue success  
 However mean! So, my still baffled hope  
 Seeks out abstractions. . . .  
 (604–08)

The speaker seems convinced that his very desire to be in the company of God will be redemptive, and despite his resolve to pursue this end, he remains suspicious of his method, sickened that he, finally, "cannot be immortal, taste all joy" (810). His yearning to apprehend a heightened truth, to attach his will to the Will of God – an essential if futile movement into the "outward" – has become by the end of the poem a need for survival so desperate that it lacks connection to any poetic lore or tradition.

*Pauline's* speaker wants to take in all experience – and he seemingly possesses the energy (though not the shaping will) to realize this desire. But this energy ultimately turns inward and spins off into labyrinthine confession. Paracelsus, on the other hand, has a

focused aim: he “aspire[s] to KNOW (pt. I.282), and the vast power of his soul that he unflinchingly directs toward this aim very nearly displaces its excessively idealistic character. Paracelsus’ aspiration is immense, his belief in himself is so thoroughgoing that he dispenses with experience altogether or minimizes the significance of any single action.

While each protagonist expects his apotheosis through identification with God, the speaker in *Pauline* seeks God in the “lurking-place” (7) of his own being – only to find that “God is gone / And some dark spirit sitteth in his seat” (471–72). He is shattered, fearful – quite in contrast to Paracelsus, who seeks more than God’s presence. His one aim is nothing less than “to comprehend the works of God, / And God himself, and all God’s intercourse / With the human mind . . .” (pt. I.533–35). To disregard “God’s great commission,” Paracelsus initially believes, is to ignore “man’s true purpose, path and fate” (pt. I.277). Paracelsus views the Will of God as that divine entity to which man’s will strives to attach itself, and at first his desire to outstrip all limits of mortal existence is checked by his reverence for the deity – a reverence which soon dissipates – and by his belief that he is incapable at this point of accomplishing such a feat. This reverence leads him “to submit / [His] plan, in lack of better, for pursuing / The path which God’s will seems to authorize” (pt. I.171–73), thus abrogating for the moment his own will-to-individuality. Below this thin overlay of supplication is a massive ambition, born of the fear of his own inadequacy and of possible divine rejection. Fearing failure, Paracelsus makes certain provisions, but he does so perfunctorily. If confronted with failure of any sort, he resolves to live “just as though no God there were” (pt. I.188), a brave if impudent assertion which imbues the human will with its own divinity and announces that he is ready to do whatever it takes to get what he wants.

The alchemist’s friend, Festus, reveals something of the potential of Paracelsus, as the latter sets out to make his own myth, to add what is singular about himself to the culture:

. . . you prepared to task to the uttermost  
 Your strength, in furtherance of a certain aim  
 Which – while it bore the name your rivals gave  
 Their own most puny efforts – was so vast  
 In scope that it included their best flights,



Combined them, and desired to gain one prize  
 In place of many, – the secret of the world,  
 Of man, and man's true purpose, path and fate.  
 (pt. I. 270–77)

But Paracelsus discovers that he cannot survive in the exalted world that he envisions and is nearly destroyed there, thus justifying the worth of the very reality he wishes to transcend. Because he is not alive to the risks involved, the victory he seeks would be performed rather than won, merely acted out rather than fully experienced. His will-to-know can be vital only if he is aware and accepting of the ultimate and necessary futility of such a quest as his. Only then, as Festus maintains, can the striving itself truly matter and not seem empty movement.

At various points in the poem, Paracelsus seems to be aware that man's instinctual nature is to strive, but he is so bent on his divine objective that he loses sight of the worth of this striving. In one epiphanic moment, he fashions a brilliant metaphor for the enigmatic power that flows through all things:

What fairer seal  
 Shall I require to my authentic mission  
 Than this fierce energy? – this instinct striving  
 Because its nature is to strive? – enticed  
 By the security of no broad course,  
 Without the success forever in its eyes!  
 How know I else such glorious fate my own,  
 But in the restless irresistible force  
 That works within me? Is it for human will  
 To institute such impulses? – still less,  
 To disregard their promptings! . . .  
 Ask the geier-eagle why she stoops at once  
 Into the vast and unexplored abyss,  
 What full-grown power informs her from the first,  
 Why she not marvels, strenuously beating  
 The silent boundless regions of the sky!

(pt. I. 333–43, 347–51)

Here again he tries to account for his “restless, . . . / [d]istrustful, most perplexed” (pt. I. 506–7) nature: “[I] felt somehow / A mighty power was brooding, taking shape / Within me . . .” (pt. I. 509–11), and “I was endued / With comprehension and a steadfast will” (pt. I. 546–47). Convinced that his own “steadfast will” will harness the

very “cravings” from which it was formed, Paracelsus is the victim of a deception that is the essence of his character. Yet he has taken human promise beyond its limits, to that point at which either creativity (here, self-realization) results or individual will is made obsolete, where there remains nothing left for which to strive – and no impetus if there were.

If energy comes to dominate the will, this energy becomes “vile lusts” which “grow up and wind around a will / Till action [is] destroyed” (pt. 2.135–37). The more persistent his striving after absolute truth, the more kaleidoscopic this truth becomes; devastated that “truth is just as far from [him] as ever” (pt. 3.502) and helpless to explain his failure, he cries out for the power that sustained him as a young man:

Give [me] but one hour of my first energy,  
Of that invincible faith, but only one!  
That I may cover with an eagle-glance  
The truths I have, and spy some certain way  
To mould them, and completing them, possess!  
(pt. 2.257–61)

His only consolation, and it is a considerable one, proves to be a vision of the continuum of existence, an abiding faith in the evolution of humankind and the renovation of human spirit. Finally accepting that the world will survive his perception of it, Paracelsus believes that Man should,

Desire to work his proper nature out,  
And ascertain his rank and final place,  
For these things tend still upward, progress is  
The law of life, man is not Man as yet.  
(pt. 5.740–43)

Unable to focus their energies or to imagine an authentic quest, the speakers in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus* barely survive their poems. But because Sordello’s plan is to become the prophet-poet, itself a lofty but specific aspiration, his will takes on an aliveness and an efficacy wanting in the other two protagonists. As a poet, Sordello wants to disrupt, to forge a new poetry, style a language for that poetry, create an audience and in doing so both define and transcend his culture and his subjectivism. Sordello gains victory in a singing tournament he chances upon as he arrives in Mantua. He then

imagines the heights he might attain and immediately becomes possessed of a will-to-perfection that proves his undoing as a poet.

Pride, or perhaps a premonition of the boredom that often accompanies complete success, smothers Sordello's will to push himself and his audience beyond his and their expectations. From this point, he begins to perform his songs rather than create them afresh, and the audience is merely entertained. Sordello begins to sing from a distance, half-heartedly, allowing his audience to fabricate its desire for his performance, a performance that is reduced to a mimicry of the audience's distorted expectations. Having refused to commit himself either to his art or to his followers, Sordello parodies his talent and nearly destroys his soul. Eventually, he begins to see himself as the misunderstood artist, but this view is only a rationalization for his lack of will to create; he consummates his own degradation by placing the blame for his failure on those who once adored him.

Sordello leaves Mantua and returns to Goito, worn and empty, his humiliation unbearable. Now divided by his social responsibilities and his desire to retain integrity as a poet, Sordello experiences an internal struggle that is soul-destructive. In this moment of crisis, however, he is permitted an intimation of a new, perhaps redemptive direction. He develops the desire to lead his people – to “wreak ere night / Somehow my will upon it [his vision of philanthropy]” (bk. 3.214–15). Sordello intends his involvement with the citizenry to effect a reforming of his self-concept; but as with Paracelsus, this strategy reveals the self-deception at its center. If the development of his identity rests on the validity and sincerity of his plan of reformation, then his scheme is only a new angle on an old objective.

Sordello's is an ill-formed humanism; his objective is to aid his “disciples,” to provide them direction by willing their actions, and thus their existence, by shaping them to fit his revolutionary ideas:

This phalanx, as of myriad points combined,  
Whereby he still had imaged the mankind  
His youth was passed in dreams of rivalling,  
His age – in plans to prove at least such thing  
Had been so dreamed, – which now he must impress  
With his own will, effect a happiness  
By theirs, – supply a body to his soul  
Thence, and become eventually whole

With them as he had hoped to be without –  
 Made these the mankind he once raved about?

[bk. 4.197–206]

Eventually, Sordello becomes decisive but still has neither a sense of his limitations nor control over his authoritarian passion. A gulf exists between his view of himself and the reality of his “eagerness to rule,” to “Impress his will on mankind” (bk. 4.275–76). Because he foolishly believes that his “Will / Owns all already. . .” (bk. 3.175–76) Sordello becomes two selves. He is a fragmented soul precisely because his own selfish aims undermine his apparent desire to serve his fellows. When the will is made slave to any other faculty, when it is blocked from attaining its highest impulse, man’s personality becomes twisted, his will often made obsolescent altogether. Like Paracelsus, Browning’s other failed visionary in this first group of poems, Sordello is not alive to the deliberateness necessary to apprehend that power greater than his own. And like the speaker in *Pauline*, he gradually begins to lose any notion of uniting with some force outside himself, as he listens to Palma, who attempts to explain the awesome quality of the “One,” an unattainable power and an essential impetus:

“How dared I let expand the force  
 Within me, till some out-soul, whose resource  
 It grew for, should direct it? Every law  
 Of life, its every fitness, every flaw,  
 Must One determine whose corporeal shape  
 Would be no other than the prime escape  
 And revelation to me of a Will  
 Orb-like o’ershrouded and inscrutable. . . .”

(bk. 3.319–26)

Sordello’s inability to assess the measure of his talent, his apparent willingness to throw away this gift, his condescension to his public, and then his need to dominate it suggest his paradoxical nature, his self-aggrandizement, underscoring his majestic failure. If one’s soul develops through artistic creation and political involvement, then Sordello’s soul has indeed developed. The poem itself is a study of the will as a potential agent of salvation, as an element of personality, and as the deepest self; it is also a study of the collapse of that will under the weight of internal and cultural pressures too great to bear.

Sordello wants greatness immediately, but he is unwilling to give the supreme effort to reach this ideal. He wanted to fashion the ideal state from his poetic vision, but he realizes that he cannot manufacture such a state, and even if he could he knows it would be disastrous to impose it on the unwilling. His seeming failure is not without nobility and poignancy. His will had, in large measure, remained dynamic. He has broken clear of the "gross flesh" (pt. 1.730) that imprisoned Paracelsus and the "clay prison" that held the speaker in *Pauline*:

God has conceded two sights to a man –  
 One, of men's whole work, time's completed plan,  
 The other, of the minute's work, man's first  
 Step to the plan's completeness: what's dispersed  
 Save hope of that supreme step which, descried  
 Earliest, was meant still to remain untried  
 Only to give you heart to take your own  
 Step, and there stay, leaving the rest alone?  
 Where is the vanity? Why count as one  
 The first step, with the last step? What is gone  
 Except Rome's æry magnificence,  
 That last step you'd take first? – an evidence  
 You were God: be man now! Let those glances fall!  
 (bk. 5.85–97)

The real way seemed made up of all the ways –  
 Mood after mood of the one mind in him;  
 Tokens of the existence, bright or dim,  
 Of a transcendent all-embracing sense  
 Demanding only outward influence,  
 A soul, in Palma's phrases, above his soul,  
 Power to uplift his power. . . .  
 (bk. 6.36–42)

These lines suggest just how far Browning had come in this early poetry and something of what the journey was worth; there is discovery here, invention, a sense of having broken through and likewise of having only begun. This poetry is significant in Browning's development as a vitalist poet in that it explores that segment of the Romantic tradition which emphasizes the relationship between the strange, dynamic force in which the poet believed and the workings of the human will which so fascinated him. Browning early held the conviction that life was vital in all its parts and that our nature to strive for wholeness is prompted by the evolutionary

principle of life itself. Although he recognized that man's role in this larger progress was insignificant in relativistic terms, he expressed more than just a casual interest in the notion that the unceasing movement of life, from its lowest forms to its most glorious moments, is in some sense inseparable from man's own development. Humankind is the supreme rational representative of this dynamism, but man is not fully confident that his evolution continues beyond earth's finiteness; nor is he sure of the extent of his evolutionary potential in the temporal world.

In his best poetry following *Sordello* and through *The Ring and the Book*, Browning would work out Paracelsus' intimation that dynamism is the law of life. An enigmatic principle, it surfaces in man as the will – his mere impetus to act, his means of choosing, his desire to better his condition, his need for self-concept. Man is not always allowed unopposed movement or unobstructed release of his energy, but much of Browning's poetry operates on the belief that the potential for such freedom not only exists but must be sought relentlessly, even recklessly. Browning was most interested in how his “men and women” went about making sense of their personal experience and how they strove to make this experience compatible with what was promising and dispiriting in larger currents of life. Individual will must be pitted against these larger forces if one is to measure the value of the life one has created and will continue to create for oneself.

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