

FRA LIPPO LIPPI:
BROWNING'S REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AND ART

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Abstract: The state of intellectual curiosity in the twenty first century is that there is no publicly accepted moral and emotional Truth, there are only perspectives towards it – those partial meanings which individuals may get a glimpse of at particular moments but which, formulated as ideas for other moments and people, become problematical. The empiricism in Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, 'Fra Lippo Lippi', as demonstrated by its disequilibrium between sympathy and judgement, is a sign that it imitates not life but a particular perspective towards life, somebody's experience of it. Robert Browning gives us his own version of Truth, about life and art, as he saw it, in one of his most delightful and revealing dramatic monologues, 'Fra Lippo Lippi'. We find in Browning's poetry what our age most needs, faith which is adequate and consistent with our intellectual culture and which indicates the direction in which we must look for the religion of the future. This paper explores the purpose of life on this earth in the light of Browning's reflections on life and art in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'.

On one memorable evening in 1855, in Dorset Street, London, some poets gathered at the Brownings' home for an evening of poetry. Tennyson read his newly published *Mal/d*, while tears coursed down his cheeks, and Browning followed him with 'Fra Lippo Lippi'. ~leanwhile Rossetti, unobserved made a pen and ink sketch of the event. 'Fra Lippo Lippi' was a favourite with its author who often used to read it aloud, The reason is obvious.. The poem is full of life, movement, humour and snatches of song, and it poses a question every reader can understand I :

This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means immensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink. (*lilleJ*
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So, the poem creates a concern in our mind about the meaning of life and makes us think why it was given to us. It also indicates the possibility of art as a medium of instruction to increase our appreciation of life.

But it is also important to the readers from another point of view. Browning wrote to Miss Barrett in 1845, 'I only make men and women speak - give you truth broken into prismatic hues and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me.'" By 'white light' and 'prismatic hues', Browning symbolized the difference between the 'undeflected spiritual idealism' of his wife's lyric poetry and the 'trammelled humanism of his dramatic verse.' It was not only Mill's adverse criticism of *Porfino* (which almost pushed Browning away from poetry forever) but also his habitual reticence that led Browning away from subjective poetry towards the more objective dramatic monologue. But, unlike Shakespeare, he could never be totally objective towards his characters. Rather, 'he is prone to make them voice his own ideas, to grant them only semi independence, or even to reduce them, to mouthpieces of his personality.'" Nowhere does he come closer to stepping directly out on the stage than in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'; and he comes very close to admitting it in the lines:

Out of a corner when you least expect, As
one by a dark stair into a great light,
Music and talking, who but.....
(lines 361-63)

Fra Lippo Lippi (1406-69) was a Florentine painter in the middle of the fifteenth century. Lippi was orphaned at two and left in the hands of a poor aunt. In 1421 he was registered in the community of the Carmelite Friars of S. Maria del Carmine in Florence where he remained until 1432. After leaving the monastery, he worked for a time in Padua, then returned to Florence where he won the patronage of Gosimo de' Medici. In 1442, he was made Rector of S. Quirico at Legnaia, but was dismissed for misconduct in 1455. While acting as chaplain of the convent of S. Margherita in Florence, he eloped with a nun, who bore him a son, who was to become a notable painter himself. Lippi painted a series of monumental frescoes in the choir of the cathedral in Prato, near Florence; they are considered his greatest achievement. Though he painted exclusively religious subjects, his work was rich in human content.' Browning picked him up from Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. But he

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follows only the bare outlines of the biography and uses the thin mask of Lippi's character to render his most forceful statement on the relation between life and art. According to the introduction to Browning in the Norton Anthology, many of Browning's poems explore the problems of 'faith and doubt, good and evil and problems of the function of the artist in modern life'.- It is noteworthy that out of Browning's astonishing store of knowledge in history he picks the right time and the right man for this purpose. It is significant that the background of 'Fra Lippo Lippi' is the early Renaissance, where he could show the contrast between 'an age of humanistic individualism' and the 'other worldliness and social conformity of the Middle Ages'. Because we, in the twenty first century, can easily identify ourselves with those who lived through the Renaissance. One was a period of discovery and change, the other is an age of unprecedented scientific advancement and unimaginable technological achievement. Both ages put its people through an emotional roller coaster as the changes are too rapid and vast to adapt to. Both ages highlight individualism as the fast progressing society released individuals from the bonds of conformity.

The first time we meet Lippi in the poem we find him struggling under the clutches of the city guards who are surprised to find a monk, deep in the night, in an alley where 'sportive ladies leave their doors ajar'. But he is not the least abashed; rather he exclaims with virility, 'come, what am I a beast for?' (*line 80*) and threatens the guards with the fact that he is a 'friend' of the Cosima of the Medici. He resents it that the guards would have remained mum if it had been the Cosima who were caught but he was treated with a 'gullet's gripe',

Underlying his jovial and self - content personality, however, is a poignant strain of pain and deprivation. As an orphan on the street of Florence, surviving on 'refuse and rubbish', and an aunt who 'trussed' him regularly for all relation, survival was his main motivation and he readily renounced:

The world, its pride and greed' Palace,
farm, villa, shop and banking house, Trash such
as these poor de-vils of Medici Have given their
hearts to
(*lines 98-101*)

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He was content to have instead:

The good bellyfull,
The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,
And day - long blessed idleness beside!

(lines 103-05)

The struggle for survival bred in him a deep insight into human character. \\hereas the reference to the 'Prior's niece' adds a humourous touch to the poem and indicates the debauched character of the Prior; Lippi gives us human character in two masterful strokes. One is of 'the breathless fellow at the altar - foot, Fresh from his murder' who sits safely amidst innocent little children, who look at his beard with admiration while the victim's son shakes his fist in hopeless fury from the church door, yet controls his anger in fear of God. The other is the portrait of a poor prostitute who came secretly in the evening, her face hardly visible, 'dropped in a loaf, Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers' hoping God might forgive her sins. Here is innocence and crime lying side by side as we find them in this world of flesh and blood. In real life morality is not an inflexible standard, it is largely dependent on perspective. We can perhaps judge the murderer easily but we cannot pass a sentence so imperturbably on the prostitute who might have been a victim of circumstances. As William O Raymond explains:

Browning's acute consciousness that the central purpose of life on earth is the fashioning of individual character led him to stress its hazards and hardships. The world is ordained to be a moral battleground, a sphere of trial, testing and probation. The limitations, obstacles, hostile forces with which man must grapple are the stern but indispensable conditions of soul development. In order to accentuate the poignancy and arduousness of the process, the poet dwells with unflinching realism on the grim potency of evil and suffering.~

Art, naturally, follows life. For, it is an expression of what we see around us. And in reality the life we see does not only come in the form of a soul, it has a body as well. Thus, when Lippi first starts painting, he is drawn

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instinctively to the people around him for subjects. His paintings are so true to life that even the Prior who looks at Lippi's art critically, is drawn to appreciate them for a moment, until his old school outlook gets the better of him, and he rebukes Lippi saying he should ignore 'the perishable clay' and draw people's attention to the soul to 'make them forget there is such a thing as flesh' (*line 182*).

Here, we can easily recall another poem by Browning, 'Andrea del Sarto'. Andrea was another Renaissance painter. But whereas Lippi has no doubt about his artistic formula, Andrea suffers from a sense of tragic failure. He envies Michaelangelo and the rest of his contemporaries who have been able to express the human soul through their paintings though their lines and curves may not have been as perfect as his. It is perhaps because of his lack of inspiration; or it may be the result of his obsession with perfection which often kills the inspiration behind a work of art. But Lippi is all inspiration and as a result suffers from no such hesitations. He draws what he sees and since the body and the soul are inseparable in existence, it is the only logical conclusion that they cannot be separated in art. So, he says:

Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn, Left
foot and right foot, go a double step, Make his
flesh liker and his soul more like, Both in their
order?

(lines 205-08)

Browning resolves the problem with the idea:

For don't you mark? We're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have
passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see; And so
they are better, painted - better to us,

Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
(lines 300-04)

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So, the function of the artist, as it stands out in 'Fra Lippo Lippi', is to represent God's creation in his art and to bring out

The beauty and the wonder and the power, The
shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises - and God made it all!
(*lines 283-8*)

Browning thus suggests that through art we learn to appreciate not only God's creations, big and small, good and bad, animate and inanimate, beautiful and ugly, but also Him as the Creator of them all. If we think in this way, then:

You'll find the soul you have missed Within
yourself when you return Him thanks.
(*lines 219-20*)

William O Raymond says:

While Browning's belief in the supremacy of the soul is unfaltering, he rejects any ascetic conception of man's nature. Although the body and the senses are from one point of view limitations of man's spiritual insight, they are the necessary conditions of his moral probation, the working tools through which the soul's development on earth is achieved. ¹¹

Thus, the tomfoolery that we find Lippi indulging in is in fact an expression of his artistic frustration because, 'The world and life's too big to pass for a dream' (*line 251*). Just as the body needs food, the creative instinct of an artist needs freedom. Whereas Lippi wants to enjoy life he is shut up in his mew, while he wants to draw people in real life he is compelled to paint 'saints and saints and saints again'. But there is hope. Once in a while he defies his superiors and indulges in little escapades which replenish him and give him fresh inspiration. Because love is a potent force. Specially in the present age, sometimes we see people constructing a dream of future happiness, to build which they are so engrossed that sometimes they forget the pleasure of the present. They do not want the bondage and responsibility of marriage, but unable to deny

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the requirements of nature, indulge in unstable relationships which bring more pain than pleasure. Lippi reflects the thought in the song: *Take awgy love, and our earth is a tomb!* (line 54). He has ne\er known love since his childhood and easily mistakes the momentary comfort of physical pleasure as Im'e. He is painting the portrait of St. Jerome struggling to subdue the demands of the flesh; but he realizes that man and woman were created to be together as a source of comfort and companionship:

I always see the garden and God there
A - making man's wife: and, my lesson
learned,
The value and significance of flesh, I
can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards;
(lines 266-69)

It is thus the creed of the church forbidding marriage, denying one of the basic demands of human nature that is to be blamed for Lippi's shortcomings. Browning was a believer in religion but he was too human to think of religion as a sum - total of rules and regulations without any human considerations. He believed in the divine condescension to human weakness and imperfection as. 'flowing from the very essence of God as a being of infinite 10ve'.¹¹ So, he is impatient with those who resort to 'scare tactics' to encourage the observance of religious values~ It is to be inspired, not enforced:

You should not take a fellow eight years
old
And make him swear to never kiss the
girls.
(lines 224-25)

Browning expressed his wBh in *Pauline*, 'to be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all' (lines 277-78). life, according to Browning is to be lived, not contemplated. Art is to portray not the soul alone but the body as well. And in the span of the 392 lines of 'Fra Lippo Lippi', Browning presents to us about a dozen characters, the conflicting views of life and art, and social

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evils such as destitution, prostitution and domination. Character is drawn in only a few strokes but it makes a lasting impression:

He's Judas to a tittle, that man is!
Just such a face!
(lines 25-26)

According to R.B. Anis, 'Browning's men and women are people of action and they hate passive behaviour'. '2 When Lippi is escaping from his mew in the monastery:

Into shreds it went,
Curtain and counterpane and coverlet
All the bed furniture - a dozen knots,
There was a ladder! Down I let myself,
Hands and feet, scrambling somehow and so
dropped,
And after them.
(lines 61-66)

His thoughts are just as quick, even as an eight year old. When he is asked: 'will you renounce?', he reacts quickly:

'the mouthful of bread?' thought I;
By no means!
(lines 96-97)

Browning's language was suited to the special need of expressing action and the process of thought. Because, like Eliot, in particular, Browning was interested in exploring the devious ways in which our minds work and the complexity of four motives. 'My stress lay on the incidents in the development of the soul', wrote Browning, 'little else is worth study'. !:I

Browning's unconventional vocabulary has often been compared to the colloquial style of Donne, the soWoquy of Shakespeare or the comic verse of Chaucer.¹⁴ The process of human thought is so complex that to express it in its pure and original form, Browning often uses brackets, elliptical sentences or his sentences break out of rhyme almost into cacophony -md

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sometimes according to mood it goes into a staccato rhythm! Though his language sometimes shocked his contemporaries, it is exactly what makes his poetry so interesting and realistic. As we find in Lippi's case, his vocabulary is a mixture of the ragamuffin and the monastic. In one breath he will use a delicate phrase like 'sportive ladies' and the colloquial 'hunt it up, Do, - harry out', Edwin Muir says 'L. s Browning was interested in human activity, rather than human states such as grief or happiness, he had a technical interest, and he wrote with a professional appreciation of the importance of the modes of the professions that came into his poetry'.¹⁵ We find in Lippi's interest in the guard as a subject of his art:

I'd like his face
His, elbowing on his comrade in the
door
With the pike and lantern, - for the slave
that holds
John Baptist's head a - dangle by the
hair
. With one hand ('Look you, now', as who
should say)
And his weapon in the other, yet
unwiped!
(*lines* 31-36)

Thus we have a great poet describing a great artist in 'Fra Lippo Lippi', As Lippi looks for subjects in connection with real life, Browning too wishes to present us real characters with their flaws and perfections.

From the discussion above we can get some of the answers we are looking for. Good and evil exist in this world side by side. Every example can be found readily in God's world (nature is complete *line* 297), But He has given us a choice between the two, We cannot

always do the moral thing perhaps, but we are expected to fail:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his
grasp,

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Or what's a heaven for? ('Andrea del Sarto', *lines* 91-98)

These lines embody the essence of Browning's philosophy of life. And they encourage us to strive for perfection with whatever we have got. Because ultimately what matters is the effort, endeavour, attempt and willingness to do good. In this respect the function of the artist is also to try and highlight God's creation and make man appreciate what the Creator has given us. But Browning says, to do so he must be able to appreciate life first. As William O Raymond explains:

It is Browning's consciousness that the development of a soul on earth can be achieved only by the fashioning of it in the warp and woof of the coloured strands of human experience which underlies his philosophy of life and imparts warmth and realism to his poetry.

Thus, in this age of scientific advancement, special effects and action mms, we must not forget that we are on this earth for a purpose. We are here to do good at whatever station of life we may be. We will always try to do the right thing, the moral thing, even if we fail at times, even if we suffer at times. It is not for us to judge anyone for their actions as it remains unknown to us under what circumstances those actions were performed. This is the faith that can keep us in peaceful co - existence in today's world of hatred and war. And it remains the function of the artist, any artist - whether a painter, a poet, a writer, a photojournalist or an actor - to point out to us the beauty found in God's creation and guide us towards a goal of purity; it is for them too to point out the ugliness in this world and make us shudder so that we are conscious to avoid them at all costs.

This is what we receive from Browning's reflections on life and art in this poem and this is what makes the poem so relevant to our situation in the twenty first century.

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