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## «FRA LIPPO LIPPI»: THE REAL THING

*Art is art, because it is not nature.*

*Johan Wolfgang Goethe*

*What's art but an intense life...?*

*Henry James<sup>1</sup>*

In his famous «Essay on Shelley» («Introductory Essay», 1852) Robert Browning indicated that an age would never completely understand its artists because they live a more advanced stage of existence than the people around them. The poet's soul in particular has «arrived at [a] higher state of development than those of his audience», according to Browning.<sup>2</sup> Does this belief mean that poets, for example, do not represent in their work the realities of their era?

The question of the role and value of representation in poetry is particularly intriguing when we study Browning's poetry. All bad poetry, according to Browning, arises from lack of accurate representation – a view which may suggest the mimetic theories rather than the poet's Romantic inheritance:

All the bad poetry in the world ...will be found to result from ...a want of correspondency between [the poet's work] and the verities of nature, – issuing in poetry, false under whatever form, which shows a thing not as it is to mankind generally, nor as it is to the particular describer, but as it is supposed to be for some unreal neutral mood.<sup>3</sup>

In contradistinction to the above view, the poet in his letter to Ruskin which defends his artistic practice in *Men and Women*, denies that a message can be conveyed directly and discursively:

I know that I don't make out my conception by my language; all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be; but by various



artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you.<sup>4</sup>

Fra Lippo Lippi, the fifteenth-century Florentine painter and monk, and the fascinating psychological and artistic peculiarity in Browning's poem, elaborates this idea when he says that no one can completely reproduce or represent nature. Does Browning, an eminently puzzling figure, explain his own aesthetic credo through his mask and if so in what sense does he regard his poems as representational?

The critics unanimously claim that there is a representational root of Browning's poetry which blossoms into the clouds of spiritual expression. According to Glen Omans, «it is only by means of an accurate portrayal of the flesh that the artist, Lippo [or Browning], is able to suggest the true nature of the soul»<sup>5</sup>. «By so doing», Omans claims, «Lippo elevates himself toward soul or God, and in turn, elevates other less gifted persons by sharpening, first, their awareness of the world of physical symbols and so leading them to a glimpse of the ideas themselves»<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, claims Donald Hair, «it is the painter's task [and the poet's] to reproduce carefully the look of things, and in doing so to lead the viewer on to a consideration of the spiritual significance of them»<sup>7</sup>. Other critics, such as Leonel Osmond and W. David Shaw, share the same belief<sup>8</sup>.

These views have many merits, and introduce some subtleties of the question, does Browning regard his poems as having primarily a representational foundation or value? Omans believes, in the context of comments on «Fra Lippo Lippi», that through this main character Browning reveals his theory of a poetry that does not merely «transcribe» reality but uses details of it «to evoke complex ideas»<sup>9</sup>. One wonders whether such ideas are contrary to reality or lack correspondence. Omans, regrettably, does not pursue the problem deeply enough. He describes «Fra Lippo Lippi» as «a poetic form which begins with the accurate, detailed, and three-dimensional portrayal of a particular human character». According to Omans the poet may begin with an accurate portrayal but he shifts to higher or transcendent topics. The critic, however, by not discussing the accuracy of these more complex ideas or justifying his own exclusion of these ideas from accurate, true description, leaves the reader baffled.

Behind this murky discussion, which is common in scholarship on Browning, there is a question not quite formed. In a discussion of «Fra

Lippo Lippi», consistent with the previously mentioned view of Omans, Donald Hair has the glimmer of some new interpretive ideas, yet they do not appear fully. Hair emphasizes not the representation of nature but the presentation of something more. In his view, Browning lifts «the veil of familiarity from the world, so that we are seeing it as if for the first time»<sup>10</sup>. It is unclear whether this glimpse of the world is new or not. What is more than an «accurate» presentation of nature? This is the question critics leave unanswered. «Andrea del Sarto», «Old Pictures in Florence», and «An Essay on Shelley» present facets of Browning's attitude towards representation in poetry but in «Fra Lippo Lippi» Browning seems to be more concerned with this issue. Before understanding what Browning meant to convey that is beyond an accurate portrayal of nature, we should consider his rejection of a representational view of poetry, and the best court for considering this case is «Fra Lippo Lippi».

Fra Lippo denies that nature can be reproduced or represented, completely and without any interpretive differences:

nature is complete:

Suppose you reproduce her – (which you can't)

There's no advantage! (ll. 297-99)<sup>11</sup>

Here Fra Lippo denies an assumption that the critics took for granted: he denies the possibility of a perfect rendering of nature. Perhaps even more surprising, he denies the value for art to do so. The monk also speaks about his use of many intricate, technical details when painting (ll. 130-50), and this approach depends for its value on accurate part-for-part representation of some physical thing. The Prior notices Fra Lippo's preoccupation with such details in his drawing book, and criticizes the monk for not giving them an outward form on their churches as pictures of monks and their churchly things. In this passage Browning shows that the value of art does not consist in details with representational value, for such a view cannot distinguish art from almost any signs, such as casual, informative markings on buildings. Thus, questioning the mimetic orientation, the poet seems to move on to what M. H. Abrams calls the expressive theory of art, and to agree with Blake:

No Man of Sense can think that an Imitation of the Objects of Nature is The Art of Painting, or that such Imitation... is worthy of Notice.... If the Art is no more than this, it is no better than any

others [sic] Manual Labour; any body may do it & the fool often will do it best as it is a work of no Mind.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the poem, Fra Lippo expresses views in opposition to the Prior. The Prior states that a painter should ignore the flesh, going beyond it to higher values (ll. 180-85); Fra Lippo claims to be a «beast» who proclaims the «value and significance of flesh» (ll. 268-70). Then, even though according to him the value of painting does not consist in technical details, nevertheless the senses are important to the artist. If sensory details are useful, perhaps they convey instructions or a spiritual message from the artist. The Prior tells Fra Lippo that art is not needed to convey instructions, because if art encodes them, they exist prior to the art and so can be conveyed non-artistically:

when your meaning's plain  
It does not say to folk – remember matins,  
Or, mind you fast next Friday! (ll. 317-19)

Ironically, this time the Prior is right: art is not needed if its value is to convey instructions or a message that it merely encodes, or polishes. But the Prior missed the meaning of what Fra Lippo had just said: «This world... / means intensely»; the artist's task is «to find its meaning» (ll. 313-15), not merely to re-write the same message in a different form. Instead, the message itself becomes transformed from life into a specific and more particular and more heightened or intense look at things. Fra Lippo believes there is no advantage in reproducing or representing nature: «You must beat her, then» (l. 299). The critics referred to at the beginning of this essay have not developed Browning's attitude towards representation in this detail, to see that he denies the representational virtue of poetry. Its value is something else.

Moreover, Browning indicates what this other virtue is – a virtue that is not antithetical to some correspondences with physical things, because sensory data of them must form the clay for poetic meaning. Immediately after Fra Lippo states that we cannot reproduce nature *completely* and that we must beat her, he defines this primary virtue of art:

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.... (ll. 300-04)

It is our nature, the monk claims, to be interested in something only when we first see it painted, or symbolized by some art. We should distinguish carefully two meanings: the monk does *not* mean that art enhances our appreciation for things already under our gaze; instead, only through art do some objects come before our mind's eye. «To find [the world's] meaning», Fra Lippo or Browning says, «is my meat and drink» (l. 315).

The primary value of poetry cannot be the accurate representation of physical things, of things already made; it is the making of new objects, having an ideal or figurative value. As a clarification and definition of the notions of art presented by Fra Lippo, a passage from «Andrea del Sarto» can help; Andrea states:

Somebody remarks  
 Morello's outline there is wrongly traced,  
 His hue mistaken; what of that? or else,  
 Rightly traced and well ordered; what of that?  
 Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?  
 Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
 Or what's a heaven for? (ll. 92-98)

Browning presents the alternatives of the accurate representation of physical things and of the inaccurate; neither matters, because the point of art is something other than copying or replicating the outer. It is more elusive. Andrea makes the hieroglyphic remark: «does the mountain care [about the accuracy of representation]?» This personification is the outward mirror of the poetic self: the poet must give form to the core of his feeling, his self, his «fancy», his «live soul»<sup>13</sup>, through the personae of mountains and men. This is indeed the core of the expressive theory: «A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings»<sup>14</sup>.

Outside of his poems, Browning states that poems communicate indirectly: «You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be...»<sup>15</sup>.

The value of a poem is not solely a discursive message but more the form of the poet's «various artifices», which Browning makes with «touches and bits of outlines». They succeed «if they bear the conception from me to you»<sup>16</sup>; or, they succeed if they transport you, if they help you to move from a conception to a new one. Of course, the poet by not employing representation as the primary virtue of poems does not ignore all relational values and data present in the everyday world. He can be said to represent only selectively and only to form an object for contemplation, not action as in the everyday representation of tables or chairs. The poet has

a double faculty of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply, than 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<sup>17</sup>.

This is the skill of an «objective poet». There is also the skill of the «subjective poet». He also has a fuller perception of nature and of man, yet he presents through the thing he perceives «Not what man sees, but what God sees»<sup>18</sup>. The expressive theory emphasizes the analogy between God and poet: «The paramount cause of poetry is... the compulsion of the "creative" imagination which, like God the creator, has its internal source of motion»<sup>19</sup>. In this type of poetry the poet's inner feeling in the total experience predominates over the forms of outward things as vehicles, mirrors, and possibilities of feeling. The difference between objective and subjective poet seems to be a matter of emphasis on theme or subjects rather than a matter of two separate but related processes.

Browning summarizes his view of poetic skill in «One Word More to E. E. B». – his dedication to *Men and Women* – when he states that rather than conveying a message to act upon, a poem presents a style to contemplate and appreciate (with any changes in action being secondary).

Let me speak this once in my true person,  
Not as Lippo, Ronald 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. 137-43)

The central point is present in the last two lines: in the first, Browning asserts an identity of heart and brain; in the second, he suggests that there is a limit to what speech can directly convey, but there is also its power to put the whole of a poet's self into the poem, his signature. When the poet's self is objectified in a poem, he can further develop and articulate his style of perceiving or feeling things, as a mirror allows one to change one's appearance; he can «remake» himself, as Yeats would say. In this respect the poet is ahead of his peers.

At the end of his monologue on his painting *The Coronation of the Virgin*, Fra Lippo Lippi refers to our question of poetic meaning and value with which he has been struggling throughout the poem. He promises that:

I shall paint a piece  
 ... There's for you!...  
 God in the midst, Madonna and her babe...  
 [and] who but Lippo! II –  
 Mazed, motionless and moonstruck – I'm the man!...  
 (lines 344, 345, 348, 363, 364)

Fra Lippo the artist has the power to perceive himself objectively and to put the whole of his perception into his painting, his signature. Then, he can articulate his style of perceiving, his theory of art, by using a concrete, «sharp, earthly, clear and sensuous diction»<sup>20</sup>. In this way the objective contemplator (Fra Lippo Lippi the painter, or Browning the poet) can achieve a sharper realization of himself and of life through the articulation of his perception.

When Yeats wrote that «even when the poet seems most himself... he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as... something intended, complete», he emphasized the analogy between artistic growth and self-realization or self-transformation<sup>21</sup>.

The statement that an artist lives a more advanced stage of existence than his contemporaries is surprising to many people when

first heard – not because they wonder at the artist being ahead of them by having a specific skill, but because art does affect the quality of life, by changing one's *perception*.

## NOTES

1. Miss Fancourt in «The Lesson of the Master».
2. *An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. W. Tyas Harden (London: Reeves and Turner, 1888), p. 18.
3. Browning, pp. 16-17.
4. See Lee Erickson, «The Self and Others in Browning's *Men and Women*», *Victorian Poetry* (1983): 64
5. «Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi", A Transcendentalist Monk», *Victorian Poetry* (1964): 129.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Browning's Experiments with Genre* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 109.
8. W. D. Shaw, «Character and Philosophy in "Fra Lippo Lippi"», *Victorian Poetry* (1964): 131. Also Leonel Osmond, «Browning and Painting», in *Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 209-10.
9. Omans, p. 144.
10. Hair, p. 109.
11. *Poems of Robert Browning*, ed. Donald Smalley (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1956), pp. 127-36. All quotations from the collection *Men and Women* come from this edition.
12. «Public Address», in Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), pages 597, 598.
13. See also Paul A. Gundiff, *Browning's Ring Metaphor and Truth* (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1972), p. 43: «... in the explanation of his function as a poet Browning [refers] to his imaginative contribution as "alloy", "fancy", "something else surpassing", "something of mine", and "live soul".... He also calls it "such substance of me interfused", "motions of mine", and "surplusage of soul"». Browning's conception of creativity is displayed in several passages in *The Ring and the Book*, especially II. 17-117 of Book IX, as well as in «Abt Vogler».
14. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 22.
15. In Erickson, p. 64.
16. Interestingly enough, «The Real Thing» by Henry James, Browning's friend, suggests that «Impressionism is a sounder principle of creative art than literal Realism.... The "real thing" [is] limiting; it encourage[s] copying rather than creation». See Bruce R. McElderly, Jr., *Henry James* (New York: Twayne, 1965), p. 123.
17. Browning on Shelley, p. 11.
18. Browning on Shelely, p. 13. See also Antony H. Harrison, *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990), pp. 46-47.
19. Abrams, p. 22. See also Gundiff, p. 43: Browning believes that «man, the creature, in attempting "to grow" repeats God's process in man's due degree.»
20. See Roma A. King, Jr., *The Bow and the Lyre* (Ann Arbor, 1957), pp. 34-36.
21. See S. J. Iliopoulos, *That Other Self: Yeats, Jung, and the Literary Psychology of the Double* (Athens: Parousia, 1993), p. 97.

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

S. J. Iliopoulos and Liana Sakelliou,  
«*Fra Lippo Lippi*: The Real Thing

Στο δοκύμιο του για τον Shelley, ο Browning ισχυρίζεται ότι οι καλλιτέχνες δεν γίνονται απόλυτα κατανοητοί από την εποχή τους, καθώς δημιουργούν σε ένα πιο προηγμένο στάδιο υπάρξεως από τους συγχρόνους τους. Από τον ισχυρισμό αυτό αναφύεται ένα ερώτημα σχετικά με το είδος της «πραγματικότητας» με την οποία ασχολούνται στο έργο τους. Με αναφορές τόσο στις έννοιες του «αντικειμενικού» και του «υποκειμενικού» ποιητή, όσο και στις Ρομαντικές θεωρίες περί τέχνης, και με επίκεντρο το ποίημα του Browning «*Fra Lippo Lippi*», αναλύεται η περίπλοκη δημιουργική διαδικασία που προτείνει ο ποιητής για την αναζήτηση «αλήθειας» και «νοήματος». Η διαδικασία αυτή, που «αναπαριστά» την αναλογία μεταξύ Θεού και ποιητή, καθρεπτίζει τη ζωτική σχέση ανάμεσα στην καλλιτεχνική δημιουργία και τη συνακόλουθη μεταμορφωτική εμπειρία, την «πραγματικότητα» που καθιστά τον καλλιτέχνη πρωτοπόρο.