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Repressed painter, rebel poet : Browning and Filippo Lippi

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Abstract

A tradition-ridden prejudiced society imposes an authoritative pressure to the instinctive and creative artist, Robert Browning in the guise of a Florentine Renaissance painter Fra Lippo. Though not openly, in a defensive mode he challenges authority and tries to acquire freedom for the artists and emphasizes on bodily presence in the process of soul searching as well. Browning puts his experiences into Fra Lippo's historical figure and thereby makes his arguments livelier and reasonable. A dominant presence of the idea 'art for art's sake' (L'art pour L'art) is felt in his arguments against the Prior. A humble attempt is made to unveil and locate the nature of repression upon and the consequent rebellion of an artist under societal pressure.

Key Words: Robert Browning, Fra Lippo, repression, rebellion, freedom

1. Introduction

Harry Blamires says, "International upheavals and vast changes in social conditions and technology would prevent us from picturing any six or seven decades of the twentieth century as an 'Age' with a character of its own."[1]

But nearly all observers of the Victorian age are struck by its extreme deference to conventions. To a later age these seem ridiculous. It was thought indecorous for a man to smoke in public and for a lady to ride a bicycle. To a great extent the new morality was a natural revolt against the grossness of the earlier Regency, and the influence of the Victorian Court was all in its favour.

Many writers protested against the deadening effects of the conventions. A sense of irritation, though not direct in many of them, seems to encompass their literary products. As Edward Albert notes, "Carlyle and Mathew Arnold, in their different accents, were loud in their denunciation; Thakeray never tired satirizing the snobbishness of the age; and Browning's cobbly mannerism were an indirect challenge to the velvety diction and smooth self satisfaction of the Tennysonian school."[2]

2. Analysis

Browning started writing poetry at an early age but success came his way very slowly, though steadily. The most felicitous thing to happen to Browning as a craftsman was the discovery of the dramatic monologue and the dramatic lyric. It enabled him to concentrate on portraying the individual in life by setting him at a particular point of interest or crisis in his own experience. The method gave him the chance for exploiting his unique gift for assuming a persona and thereby living that persona's thought and feelings.

[1] Blamires, Harry, The Victorian Age of Literature (Longman, York Press, 1988) p. 9
[2] Edward, Albert, History of English Literature (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001) p. 368

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To find previous dramatic monologues with anything like the vitality and immediacy of Browning's we have to turn back to the poems of John Donne in the 17th century. It is interesting, therefore, that Browning should remind us of Donne too in his capacity for translating passionate feeling into strenuous reasoning without forfeiting urgency and vividness. Browning's wide sympathies enabled him to enter the minds of human oddities and eccentrics and explore the inner thoughts of imposters, hypocrites and criminals without necessarily alienating the reader from his subject.

Browning achieved some of his greatest success in dramatic monologues in the volume "Men and Women", which includes the two contrasting studies of Florentine painters, "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea De Sarto". Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) was in early life a monk. He abducted a nun and was father of Filippino Lippi. Filippo Lippi's work has a detailed naturalism, and it was logical that Browning should turn him into a vital personality; abounding in energy, full of delight in life, alert at all tinces to the pictorial possibilities of what he sees around him.

In Browning's poem " Fra Lippo Lippi" Lippo is defending himself after having been caught by the watch sneaking back to Cosimo de Medici's home in the early hours after a night's escapade. The story he tells of his upbringing, and in particular, how poverty and hunger trapped him in the cloister, is a bubbling, bouncing record of exuberance and independence by one who can brook no constraints on his zest for life and art. His touching description of how he had to vow for a spiritual life at the age of eight is not only remarkable but also extremely ironic:

"I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,

palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house

Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici

Have given their hearts to— all at eight years old"

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 98-101)

In Browning's world, the prophets and artists, the lovers and doers of great deeds are never primarily remarkable for intellectual power. Their supremacy is the result of a genius for experiencing life intuitively. They posses a phenomenal capacity for passionate emotion, combined with a childlike reliance on instinct. These qualities put them in conflict with conventional modes of social conduct. E. D. H. Johnson says, "whether it be Fra Lippo, or Rabbi Ben Ezra, Or David[3] In 'Saul', or the grammarian, or Child Ronald, Browning's heroes are always the children of their intuition".

The poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" is basically a rebellion against the authority of rigid Victorian convention for the freedom of the artist, and it simultaneously shows the extreme conflict between body and soul at the spiritual level. The historical Fra Lippo here being a mere medium serves the purpose of presenting Browning's own ideas. Lippo asserts the necessity of both 'body' and 'soul' in their proper place to attain religiosity. He refuses to reject the 'body' for the sake of portraying the 'soul'. Lippo's argument against the Prior's insistence of abandoning the 'body' for 'soul' may be mentioned here:

"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? Take the prettiest face,

The prior's niece...patron saint — is it so pretty

You can't discover if it means hope, fear,

Sorrow or joy? Won't beauty go with these?"

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 205-211)

His belief that the intuitions operate through the instrumentality of the emotions rather than the intellect, led Browning to a frank celebration of man's physical nature, very foreign to Victorian reticence in such matters. Remembering the prior's pretty niece, Fra Lippo says:

"If you get simple beauty and nought else,

you get about the best thing God invents, —

that's somewhat. And you'll find the soul you have missed,

within yourself when you return Him thanks."

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 217-220)

To Browning, flesh and spirit seemed natural allies against the insidious distortions of the intellect.

[3] Johnson, E. D. H., 'Authority and the Rebellious Heart', in Watson, J. R., ed., Browning: Men and Women and Other Poems, Casebook Series, Macmillan press ltd, London, 1994.

So, Fra Lippo in his defense of the street urchin's apprenticeship to life exclaims:

"Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
He learns the look of things, and none the less
For admonitions from the hunger-pinch."

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 124-126)

E. D. H. Johnson says, " the greatest artists are those whose sense and intuitions work together in harmonious unison. The great enemy of man's intuitional nature, as we have seen, is the intellect; and in artistic enterprises the intellect's weapon of sensory impressions is tradition". So, the artists we find Browning holding up for admiration are instinctual rebels and individualists. We find the fullest expression of the poet's aesthetic philosophy in "Fra Lippo Lippi". We encounter Fra Lippo in significant circumstances as he has just been apprehended as a potential law breaker. We learn that he fled the confinement of his patron's house because it is carnival time and he is unable to resist the temptation of the streets. The irrepressible gaiety of life is implicit in the jigging refrain that keeps running through the painters mind:

"Flower o 'the broom,
take away love and our earth is a tomb!
Flower of the quince
I let Lisa go, and what good in life since"

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 53-57)

With this proposition, it is not surprising that Fra Lippo has already rejected the repression of the church and his aim survives to enhance art for it's own sake — like that of Walter Pater in later Victorian England. He has rejected the traditional forms of ecclesiastical art as exemplified in the work of such artist as Fra Angelico and Lorenzo Monaco. Fra Lippo is one of Browning's incorruptible innocents. He paints by instinct, and what he paints is the world of his perceptions, not an intellectualized abstraction of it:

"A lough, a cry, the business of the world—
(Flower o 'the peach
Death for us all, and his own life for each!)
And my whole soul revolves, the up runs over,
The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,"

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 247-251)

But underlying the intensity of his response to human experience is the perception of higher reality manifested through the appearances of this world. The artist can do nothing better than reproduce with as great fidelity as possible his individual sense of the observed facts. Thus, he records his own gratitude for the privilege of living and in the process opens the eyes of others to the meaning of life:

"... you've seen the world
—The beauty and wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades, changes, surprises — and God made it all."

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 282-285)

In this way Browning tries to assert constantly the interrelationship of the 'soul' and 'body' on an instinctual plan. Accordingly, he makes claims for the 'body' which would not otherwise have been admissible in a society as conventional and orthodox as Victorian England.

Browning believed that great art would always communicate as long as the sensibilities of its audience had not been hindered by tradition or materialized by social dogmatic pressures. His initial depression for the failure to be appreciated for his works boosted his energy to establish the artist's individual integrity. The success he achieves in his aim of shaking the whole order of conventionality and religiosity cannot go unnoticed. The last line of his poem, where he talks of the 'grey beginning' may at the metaphorical level suggest the grey beginning of the revolt against the orthodox Victorian mentality:

" Don't fear me! There's the grey beginning . Zooks!"

(Fra Lippo Lippi: 392)

3. Conclusion

We can better conclude our discussion with E. D. H. Johnson's words. He says, " Almost invariably, the artists in his poetry are somewhat alien figures, either neglected or misprized by the society in which they live. Even Fra Lippo shows a defensive attitude in challenging the tradition ridden prejudices of his age."

[4] Johnson, E. D. H., 'Authority and the Rebellious Heart', in Watson, J. R., ed., Browning: Men and Women and Other Poems, Casebook Series, Macmillan press ltd, London, 1994.

[5] Johnson, E. D. H., 'Authority and the Rebellious Heart' in Watson, J. R., ed., Browning: Men and Women and Other Poems, Casebook Series, Macmillan press ltd, London, 1994.

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